

Like Fingers Down Your Spine

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Like Fingers Down Your Spine

by [thatviciousvixen](#)

Summary

In the swampy marshes of England there is a school, a school riddled with ghosts and plagued with disappearances. Will Graham is quite sure he can get to the bottom of each mystery the Hobbs School for Boys holds, but at what cost?

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Will had hoped a relaxing drive through the country would turn his sour mood, but the foul weather between London and Peterborough had made him feel as sodden as the moors passing by. With every kilometer he was further and further away from the city, further and further away from steady work and the comforting rush that he'd grown to thrive on. He wasn't one for periods of stillness; silence gave him too much time to dwell on his own thoughts, so much more dangerous than the ghosts he was paid to track down and disprove. Yet here he was, eyes searching the steam rising from the fen as he traveled to his destination.

The road leading to the Hobbs School for Boys was long and meandering, a hard-packed trail of earth surrounded by salt marshes on either side. Long ago this land had been unfit for any sort of comfortable living. Lately though a fairly recent interest saw the government draining the land into local rivers. Still, it hadn't exactly become utopian. The area was wet, muddy, and constantly damp. No wonder the children at the school complained of spectres. Will himself could see going mad in a place such as this.

"There's the school right up ahead," the driver called from the front, raising his voice to be heard over the rattling of the automobile. "'ope the 'eadmaster don't mind you being late, the old girl don't like the marshes too well." His accent was thick, ears and cheeks ruddy and freckled from years of hard work in the sun. From the small amount of conversation they'd had Will knew he lived in the nearby village, sought out by the school due to his owning a brand new Chevrolet that was the talk of his community.

Will leaned forward, casting his eyes on what appeared to be a sprawling mansion in the distance. "I certainly hope not. He's in need of my service and there's nothing to be done for the state of the road," He adjusted in his seat, posture tightly wound. His eyes traveled over the building, taking in the well trimmed hedges and ivy crawling up the corners of the walls. A sprawling green garden was neatly bisected by a paved driveway, ending in a neat circle around a fountain. "Anyway, I'll be here for quite some time I imagine. They can afford to wait a few minutes more for me."

The driver gave a shrug, carefully steering the car around the circular drive and parking just below the entrance. "They say 'e don't like people being late, is all." Sliding out, he removed Will's trunk and set it at the foot of the steps leading up to the main entrance.

"Well, that will be my problem to deal with," Will said, managing an uncomfortable smile. He'd never been much for making friends, especially dismal at any form of small talk. As a form of apology he slid a handsome tip into the driver's palm, stepping back and watching as the driver returned to his seat and the car pulled away to returned from whence it came. The wet road squished and squelched under the tires until the sound was drowned out by distance and the steady grinding of the engine.

"Ah, Mr. Graham."

A sudden voice behind him was smooth, confident and lightly accented. Turning, Will caught his first glimpse of Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

The man stood tall and regal at the top of the stairs, posture exact as he gazed down at Will. His light hair was parted carefully, face clean shaven, outfit crisp and neat. Brushing his palms along the front of his trousers, Will ascended the stairs with his hand held out. "Dr. Lecter. I apologize for being late, the weather didn't permit a very speedy journey."

Lecter smiled, the fine wrinkles at the corners of his eyes giving them a warmth that nearly set Will at ease. "Don't worry, Mr. Graham. I know the limitations of the area, I always try to prepare for acts of God. Better not to be caught off guard."

Will relaxed a bit more, nodding. "I'd agree, if I believed in God," he said, allowing a small smile. "Which is, after all, why you called me here?"

Lecter nodded, eyebrows raised at Will's candor. He reached into his pocket and produced a small bell, ringing it lightly. The sound from the small thing carried surprisingly well. Soon the door opened to reveal two sturdy looking students. One was a good head taller than the other, but both were stocky and well built. "Please take Mr. Graham's trunk to his room," the headmaster instructed, motioning to Will's belongings. "Second floor, to the left of Dr. Chilton's room." The boys nodded their heads respectfully, grabbing Will's belongings and disappearing inside.

"They're well trained," Will mused.

"They're boys, Mr. Graham. Not dogs," Lecter said with a smile. He led Will through the large oak doors that sealed the school from the world. Inside was a cavernous foyer, well tended to with polished wooden floors, immaculate wallpaper, and a crystal chandelier lighting the entrance. Immediately the school boasted its wealth and good-taste. Will couldn't help but feel a bit out of place.

Before he could think on it any further Lecter was speaking again. "In a sense that's why I brought you here. These are boys, Mr. Graham. They're children. Something in this school is haunting them, be it corporeal or non. I want to get to the bottom of it so all they need worry about is what team is going to win the rugby match they play later this week."

Will followed closely, shoes tapping softly along the floor. The hall opened up into a large receiving room with various doors and halls splitting off of it. It was comfortably decorated, plenty of couches and chairs pulled to surround a stately fireplace. On a table to the far left of the room was a chess board seemingly halfway through a game, abandoned for some reason or another. Despite it's clean and dressed state the room was clearly well lived in and well loved, bits of wear and tear on the furniture just beginning to show its age and use.

"What exactly is it that haunts them?" Will asked curiously, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. "Ghosts aren't real, Dr. Lecter. Something must be going on if they're so frightened."

Hannibal continued walking. At the far end of the room there was a set of double doors which he pushed open to reveal his office. "Please, have a seat," he offered, gesturing to a chair facing his desk. Everything was plush and expensive-looking, from the solid oak of the desk to the numerous books that lined the shelves on the walls. A crystal decanter sat on a tray next to the door, from which Hannibal poured two glasses of scotch. "I chose this room very specifically, as it's just off the main living area. I always want the boys to know I'm nearby and available to them, for any needs they may have. If you're ever in need of me it's likely you'll find me here."

Will nodded, sinking into the chair he'd been directed to. "I'll keep that in mind. Now please, Dr. Lecter. Tell me why I'm here."

Sitting, Lecter drew a deep breath. "Our school has been...plagued with bad fortune for the last few years." He picked up a news article, sliding it over to Will. "The first boy went missing a few years ago just after spring term began. The students had barely been back from their holidays when Harry Dearborn disappeared. They never found any trace of him." Another article was slid over. "Six months later Edward Gideon disappeared. It was the same story, he seemed to just vanish into thin air. Two more went missing the following year, and another just this past April."

Will glanced at the news clippings, eyebrows raised. "January tenth, nineteen-twelve...July twenty-first, nineteen-twelve. February and August of nineteen-thirteen. And the last in February of this year." Names jumped off of the page, names of boys probably no longer of this earth. Felix Sommersby. Arthur Michaels. Daniel Grimsby. He looked up, frowning. "This is all unfortunate, Dr. Lecter, but what does it have to do with me? I'm not a detective, and I assume the police were already alerted..."

Hannibal sighed, taking a slow sip of his scotch. His Adam's apple bobbed delicately as he swallowed. "They have been, yes." His eyes were distant, staring somewhere over Will's shoulder. "But there's more to the story than just the missing boys. Now students are claiming they've seen them, walking the corridors. In, ah...various states of ruination."

"...ruination."

"Carnage, Mr. Graham," Lecter said, focusing on him once more. "Decay. One student claimed to have seen Gideon sitting in a classroom, holding his intestines in his own hands. Another said he saw Grimsby playing rugby in the middle of the night with his face peeled off of his skull."

Will stared, face paling a bit. "Oh my."

Lecter nodded gravely, folding his hands on top of his desk. "And believe me, those aren't the only stories I've heard."

"Excuse my indelicacy," Will said slowly, "but how do we know they're not simply trying to stir the pot? Children are children, after all, and they do love tall tales."

"Not these boys," Hannibal said, no trace of doubt in his voice. "I do not trust easily, Mr. Graham, and my respect must be earned. My students have my utmost respect."

Will studied his face, taking a moment to turn the words over in his mind. Hannibal Lecter was a well respected member of the educational community. Will had done his research. He was a pillar of society, no black marks or misdeeds to besmirch his name. And here he was, asking Will for help. It made him feel powerful and helpless all in one sweep of Lecter's hand.

"You're fully aware of what I do, then?" Will asked, getting down to business.

"You hunt ghosts," Lecter stated, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't hunt ghosts," Will corrected. "You can't hunt something that doesn't exist. I disprove hoaxes. So if these boys truly are seeing something, I'll get to the bottom of what it is that has them so frightened. If not, and they're doing all of this for a lark...well, I'll sort that out as well. Then it will be in your hands."

Hannibal nodded, relaxing in his chair. Will took a moment to examine him; from the sharp press of his dark gray morning coat, to the shiny brass chain of the watch tucked into his pocket. Every aspect of him was carefully thought out and carefully executed, yet he took no pains to intimidate or belittle the man sitting before him in his employ. Will had a niggling suspicion that there might be more to Dr. Lecter than met the eye, though he dearly hoped not.

"Good, good," the headmaster breathed. "I truly appreciate the speed with which you came, and I dearly hope that your time here is as comfortable as the situation will afford. I'm always at your disposal, regardless of time of day or level of importance." He finished his drink, waiting for Will to do the same before standing. "Well then. I'll call someone to show you the layout of the school, and then we'll give you some time to rest before dinner. Thank you again for your time, Mr. Graham."

"Please," he said slowly, carefully. "Will is just fine, thank you."

"And you may call me Hannibal," he replied, the same warmth as before returning to his eyes. "Until dinner then, Will."

Will exited into the foyer a few minutes later, immediately met by a petite, calm looking woman. She wore a stiff collared shirt, the white in sharp contrast to her simple black skirt. Her hair was worn simply, swept back and exposing her striking blue eyes. "Alana Bloom?" he tried, hands clasped respectfully behind his back.

"Mr. Graham," she smiled, moving forward to shake his hand. "Dr. Lecter asked me to show you around the school. Is that alright? I imagine you must be tired from the drive so if you'd like to wait until later I'm sure everyone would understand."

Will smiled, already calmed by her presence. "Now is fine, Ms. Bloom. I like to know the layout of where I'm staying before I get too settled in."

Alana nodded her acquiescence. "Of course, I'm much the same way. So you've seen Doctor Lecter's office, and the living room here. The boys spend much of their free time lounging or reading. It's quite comfortable and warm in the evening." Walking to the first room left of the entrance, she ushered him into the dining hall. It was simply decorated, crisp white table

cloths pressed and laid out over long tables that stretched the full length of the room. Tall windows let in an abundance of sunlight- more than he thought the area capable of producing. "Breakfast is at eight, lunch is at eleven, and supper is at five. Sharp. Dr. Lecter is a kind man, but he does like punctuality."

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind, I don't want him to think I have a habit of being late," Will said, laughing lightly. "We had to fight the marsh to get here."

"It can be unforgiving," Alana said, smiling knowingly. "That door there leads to the kitchens. We have a very talented staff. We prize the boys' health, so we try to keep it nutritious without being dull. Just beyond is a storage room, I suppose you won't have much need of that."

"I suppose not," Will agreed. "And to the west side of the sitting room?"

"The library, a room for the boys to study quietly, and the infirmary," Alana said, pointing to each door or entrance as she referenced what lay inside. "Our collection of books is absolutely wonderful, and it's all thanks to generous parents and the Headmaster himself."

"You seem to think highly of him," Will said, studying her from the corner of his eye.

"Everyone does," Alana assured him. "He's done wonderful things for the school, he cares deeply for the success of everyone here. Come along, I'll show you the second floor." She was apparently one for efficiency. Any time they were threatened with idleness or stillness she quickly burst into a flurry of movement.

The second floor held all of the classrooms, where Will caught his first glimpse of the students of Hobbs. With each room he stepped in multiple heads whipped around to study him, all with varying levels of curiosity or contempt. It was clear the students already knew why he was there; he would either put their fears to rest or disprove the stories they swore to be true. The teachers themselves seemed friendly enough. He soon discovered that Alana's specialty was history and government, and that her class had been dismissed for private study time while she tended to Will's tour. A man named Price taught sciences, a fellow named Zeller was maths, and each teacher had a room on the same floor that served as both an office and a living space. Will would be joining them on the second floor during his stay.

"One room left," Alana said, hurrying him along. She didn't want to leave the boys for too long, lest they completely lose focus for the day and she was unable to recover them for their lessons. Opening another classroom door, she led him inside.

"Dr. Chilton?" she interrupted politely. "This is William Graham. Dr. Lecter wanted me to show him the school and introduce him to the boys."

A short man with dark features turned towards them, a piercing look on his face. Within a moment under his glare Will was ready to crawl out of his skin and hide behind some tall piece of furniture, feeling as if he'd been caught doing something particularly heinous.

"Ah, yes. The ghost hunter," Chilton drawled, immediately taking on a particularly bored air. His voice was nasal but not unpleasant, and despite his clear and immediate dislike of Will he

had quite a handsome face. "Please be quick about it, the boys are practicing their Italian conjugations and I don't want them to lose focus."

Will nodded awkwardly, clearing his throat. "Thank you, erm, Dr. Chilton. Gentlemen, I'm here to help disprove some of the claims that have been made surrounding the disappearances at the school. Dr. Lecter himself requested I come, as we both hope to provide you with some comfort over the matter. Ghosts don't exist, and I'm going to do my best to discover what is happening so you can feel more at ease." He looked to Chilton, clearing his throat again. "Um. Thank you."

Without another word Chilton turned, resuming his lesson.

The moment they left the room Alana was swift with apologies. "I'm terrible sorry, Mr. Graham. He's never like that, I have no idea what's come over him. I mean, perhaps he's a bit self-important, but he's at least polite. I'll be sure to speak to him, I'm absolutely livid over all of this..."

Will held up his hand, laughing softly. "Please, Ms. Bloom. You have to understand, most of the people I'm working to disprove are ones who are attempting to make money off of their con. That, or grieving family members. I'm quite used to people being unhappy with my mere presence, it would take much more than an irate teacher to chase me off."

Alana huffed a breath, smoothing her skirt down. "Still. Dr. Lecter would be furious. You're his guest after all."

"Please, don't mention it to him," Will said quickly. "I'd like this to all be as smooth as possible. Why don't we continue the tour? I know there's plenty more to see."

Truthfully there *wasn't* much more to be seen. Just the third floor - which consisted of dormitories - and the attic above it. Will had decided there was no use seeing the basement just yet, and he'd take time to explore the grounds outside when rain clouds weren't looming overhead. He soon found himself in his living space, finally alone with his thoughts.

His trunk had been set on the bed, a simple mattress in the corner with simple bedclothes. A dresser was ready on the opposite wall, a small desk next to it. As he let his mind wander over the mysteries surrounding the school he began to unpack his belongings.

Five boys missing. Hannibal Lecter must have some sway, to keep the school open despite such a controversy. He wondered after the grieving parents, curious if they'd given up their searches by now or if they were still determined to find their missing children.

As he closed his trunk and set it aside he was only certain of one thing; five boys didn't disappear into thin air, and ghosts were certainly not haunting the grounds of Hobbs...but *something* was.

*

Someone is crying, somewhere very nearby. Not the simple tears of a young child on the playground, but deep, soul-wracking sobs. Miserable wails and desperate begging. Pleas to

some far-distant God who has long forgotten his children on earth.

“Save me...save me...”

His hands scrabble at the walls, bloody and torn from his desperation to pull away fading, peeling wallpaper. The wood behind is rotting and dead- he begins to break away chunks and throw them carelessly behind him, not registering any sound they may make as they land behind. Nothing is important save the weeping in the wall and his desperation to free what lies inside.

“Save me...”

Will woke with a start, panting and wide eyed. Sweat had plastered his dark curls to his forehead, pooling in the dip of his chest and slicking his back and thighs.

He could still hear the crying.

With a racing, pounding heart he flew from his bed, pulling on whatever clothing he'd cast off the night before and scrambling for his glasses. It was soft, but it was there. A pained sort of whimpering, a deep, wrenching fear that transferred straight to his heart and sent chills through him. Despite the shock of it all he felt phenomenally lucky; whoever was orchestrating this farce wasted no time in making their presence known, in giving Will an opportunity to get to the bottom of their schemes.

The sound was closer now, just outside of his door. With a shaking hand he turned the knob, yanking the door open.

Frederick Chilton stood before him in the hallway, looking haunted.

“You,” Will said slowly, a sickly sort of ire settling in his stomach. No wonder Chilton had been so unhappy at his mere presence.

“No,” Chilton murmured, soft and livid. There was a quiet sort of rage in his voice, like at any moment he could lash out with the cane he rested his weight on. “Not me.” He jumped as the weeping started again, seemingly there in the hall with them. Will quickly looked around, but there was no-one but the two men. He looked to Chilton, feeling slightly helpless.

Chilton shook his head, some of the color returning to his cheeks. “Welcome to The Hobbs School, Mr. Graham. I do hope you enjoy your stay.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which no one succeeds in making any new friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hard time sleeping?”

Will looked up from the coffee gripped tightly between his hands. It was strong and black, just what he needed after a sleepless night investigating the second floor. He looked up, quickly remembering the name of the man in front of him.

“Good morning, Mr. Price.”

“Please, Jimmy is fine,” he assured, sitting. He reached forward, grabbing a serving platter and pulling it closer. A multitude of colorful fruits were piled in the middle and spilling over the sides; ripe green apples, bunches of sweet grapes, oranges that made Will’s mouth water from the mere brightness of their peel. Carefully looking over the selection Jimmy decided on a few slices of melon, golden and sweet. “We were wondering how your first night would go. We’ve grown so used to the noises that they don’t keep us up anymore, but visitors are rarely so lucky.”

Will took a few scalding gulps, letting the strong bitterness wash over him. “Please don’t tell me you believe in these ghosts stories,” he sighed. “It just encourages whomever is putting on this act.”

Jimmy laughed, a friendly sound despite Will’s snappish response. “I don’t know what I believe Mr. Graham. I’ll leave the investigation in your more than capable hands and stick to my specialties. Lord knows the students here don’t need any extra help wandering off task from their lessons.” He looked up as another teacher joined them, taking a seat to Jimmy’s left. “Good morning, Brian.”

Brian Zeller, looking particularly surly in the shafts of sunlight cast into the room, gave a silent nod before making himself a tea.

“He’s not particularly chatty in the mornings,” Jimmy explained with a grin.

“You’re chatty enough for the both of us,” Brian muttered before downing the contents of his cup in a few swift sips.

Alana appeared at Will's right, taking the seat opposite Brian. "Good morning gentlemen," she said through a yawn, immediately starting to fill her plate. Will finally began to take notice of the spread; it was impressive for a school, even one of this stature. Poached eggs, thick slices of fluffy bread with butter and honey, sausages still sizzling from the pan. There were steaming bowls of porridge, johnny cakes, jams and syrups and plenty of coffee and tea. "Will, how did you sleep?"

"Fine, thank you," he lied, laying a piece of bread on his plate before sliding an egg on top of it. He used his fork to split the yolk, watching it ooze out in a river of cheery yellow before sliding onto the plate. "I was surprisingly comfortable despite this being my first night here." This was, of course, another lie. By the time Will had returned to his bed in the early hours of the morning sleep was a distant wish he couldn't hope to attain.

"Don't worry, it's not so jarring after a few nights," Alana said kindly, seeing right through his charade. "You get quite used to the sounds. Soon you'll be able to rest as if they weren't even there."

Will set his jaw, staring down at his plate. "I'm not afraid," he said, making a desperate attempt at not sounding terse or irate. "I'm quite annoyed, actually. Whoever is up to this has the audacity to taunt me with it from the night I arrived. I just hope this means they're getting too comfortable and they'll make a mistake that exposes them."

A scoff further down the table caused the entire group to look to the source of the sound. Frederick Chilton sat with his face in the morning news, tea and breakfast untouched in front of him. They could hear the staccato beat of his foot tapping against the floor.

Will turned, pursing his lips. "It would seem that the skeptic has a skeptic."

"Ignore him," Brian scoffed, working through a muffin he'd buttered and spread with jam. "He's always in some sour mood, he doesn't take very kindly to strangers."

"I don't think that's it, but I do appreciate you taking pains to soothe me," Will said, smiling bitterly. "We had a bit of an exchange last night. He's just as superstitious as the children here and apparently my being in the school is some sort of affront to him." Will noticed his three companions looking uncomfortable, each suddenly quite focused on their food. "What? Have I said something wrong?"

"No, of course not," Alana said quickly. "It's just...well..."

"We all believe it's supernatural," Jimmy finally admitted, looking as if he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "If you think we're crazy or superstitious that's just fine, but you've only just arrived Will. We've been living with this for years. The things that people have heard, what some of the children have *seen*...it's hard to write off as science."

Will let his head fall back, a pained groan escaping his lips. "Not you lot as well..."

Down the table Chilton made a great show of shutting his paper, slamming it on the table and rising to leave. Will looked back to Alana, lips pressed in a tight line.

“I can’t wait to prove everyone wrong, even if only to see the look on his face when I do.”

*

Early morning classes came, and with them came Will’s first opportunity to cast his eyes about. The problem with a great building like this particular school was the infinite amount of places that could be used as hiding areas for someone up to mischief. His first task of the day was to seek out any nook or crevice a person might hide in, any passage that could be used for swift escape. From there he could begin a more sound investigation of the grounds.

Sorting out his plan of attack, the most logical place to start seemed to be the basement. From there he could work his way up, eliminating every possible floor until he had some answers. The steps leading down were located in the larder, a small room just beyond the kitchens. It was dark and cool in the little space; searching for the door down took him a long moment, one hand sweeping over the ground as the other held a gas lamp to light the way. After a thorough search he found a small crevice in the floor, managing to wedge his fingers in and pull the door up. Hannibal had informed him that the basement was rarely used due to safety concern, a fact reinforced by just how much the hinges protested at the sudden end to their slumber. A shrieking, rasping sound of metal on metal filled the darkness, setting his teeth on edge.

The path down was a black pit that made his stomach turn. Meager light cast a dim glow over the first few steps, but everything beyond was a mystery. With a deep breath he stepped down into the void.

His first thought was surprise over the warmth of the basement. By all rights it should be cool and dry, but a sticky sort of mugginess drifted about and latched onto his skin. It was almost oppressive. It filled his lungs and rested heavily on his tongue. Without thinking he lifted his shirt, covering his mouth and breathing through the fabric.

The steps were dry, crackling underfoot as he descended. As a precaution he trailed his free hand along the wall, steps slow and deliberate to prevent any unfortunate tumbles that would end his investigation before it truly began. A few more steps and he was safely on the bottom floor, lamp stretched far in front of him.

“Now. Let’s find these ghosts,” he hummed, squinting behind his glasses.

A perfunctory sweep with his lamp showed nothing out of the ordinary. The basement seemed to be a simple storage place, piles of out-of-date textbooks and broken furniture stacked neatly through the cavernous area. A tower of chairs and tables seemed to create a labyrinth that he carefully navigated in the dim light. If there were more lamps he couldn’t find them; it seemed any work done below ground was done solely with the light of the bearer.

Will set the lamp down and got straight to work; he moved various odds and ends, checked the walls, thoroughly examined the floors. Everything the room had to offer was scrutinized under his curious glance, from the cobwebs in the corners to the piles of dust on the floor.

He found nothing.

“Damn,” he hissed into the darkness, sweeping some hair out of his eyes. “There’s always something in the basement.”

With a resigned sigh he returned to the stairs, trudging back to the first floor. His sweep of the rooms there produced the same lack of evidence, the same absence of any useful information. He made a mental note to speak to Hannibal later, ask for absolute permission to tour his office. The headmaster had already shown him great kindness, he certainly didn’t want him as an enemy. Leaving the second floor classrooms for when the students weren’t in them, he scoured the third-floor dormitories before finding himself ascending the ladder into the attic.

Where the basement was cluttered and dark, the attic was a sprawling, empty area full of light. It seemed to have been completely forgotten - save for an old desk in the corner it was devoid of any and all clutter. No furniture, no books, no broken sporting equipment. Just an old oak floor, a sloping ceiling that met at a high point far above him, and a few windows that let floating motes of dust dance in the early afternoon sunlight.

“There can’t be nothing,” he said wearily, going to get a closer look at the walls. He took great pains to run his fingers along every inch of plaster and lathe he could reach. So many houses had hidden rooms, secret doors that led to tunnels or places for people to hide in a pinch. Especially now with the country on the eve of war-it just seemed foolish to have no place to bunker down. *Somewhere* in the school there was a room or a passage hidden to the naked eye. He just needed to be patient.

Dropping to his hands and knees he began to check every inch of the floorboards. Knocking here, prodding there; often in his travels he came across loose slats that “mediums” would use for easy access to various props. They would even use their toes to push one side of a board, letting the other end rise up before dropping it abruptly to create a loud bang that would startle everyone in attendance. Since the board would be hidden under a table the attendees would of course think the noise was some spiritual anomaly, a ghost trying to contact them from the other side. Yet he found nothing loose, nothing slightly out of place.

After a good half-hour of searching he had nothing to show but a few splinters and a sore back. With a groan he stood, walking stiffly over to sit at the abandoned desk.

Peering at his fingertips and carefully extracting slivers of wood, Will had to remind himself that he’d not yet finished his tour of the school. There was still the second floor, still the grounds outside. There was plenty of space left for people to move quickly and without being spotted. Not to mention the marshes, a literal quagmire of gloom and misery to slip into. There had been plenty of men and women of a particular cleverness who Will managed to expose through his years of investigating hoaxes, he wasn’t going to lose hope after only a morning of examination.

With another creaking groan he stood, stretching his arms out above him and arching his back just so. As it was, his head ended at just the proper angle to see a streak of blood spattered along the ceiling.

Will’s heart began to pound in his chest. There was no ladder, no high stool to get close enough to examine the rust-colored stain above him. He pulled the desk right under, carefully standing on top so he could at least get a bit more height.

It was most assuredly blood. The brownish tint, that tell-tale oxidization, told him it had been there for quite some time. It wasn't much - just a few scarce speckles across the ceiling. Still, a few scarce speckles were enough to be ominous. Jumping off the desk with a loud *thud* he pushed it out of the way and stretched out on the floor just under the stain. With a swift, sweeping motion he moved his hand across his throat, mimicking a knife sliding across a throat. Curious eyes followed the pattern of his imaginary wound, watching his bright red blood splatter out on top of the stains.

"He was lying down when he had his throat cut," Will murmured to himself, setting his teeth into his bottom lip. Whoever attacked the boy - whichever boy it was - had taken great pains to clean the floorboards and the walls of any proof of the murder. But everyone slipped up, even the cleverest of murderers.

With a sigh Will lifted his head, letting it fall back to the floor. "You are not here to solve a murder," he whispered to himself. "You are here to solve a ghost." Dragging himself into a sitting position he pulled a small, leather-bound notebook from his trouser pocket, making a note of the blood stain. Just underneath he added a simple sketch, copying the pattern of the blood and where on the ceiling it could be found. With another sigh he stood, tucking the notebook away and returning to the stairs.

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Frederick Chilton wasn't a fool. He wasn't easily conned, wasn't coaxed by pretty words, and most certainly wasn't unintelligent. He'd worked long and hard to earn his reputation, had toured the world and studied extensively to be as learned and respected as he had become. From his childhood he'd shown an extraordinary grasp of languages. He easily picked up the Spanish taught to him by his immigrant parents as well as the English used in every conversation outside of his home. By secondary school he was adept in French and Italian, even learning a fair bit of Mandarin during his years in university.

So how on earth could one man with unkempt hair and an unsure, stammering manner of speaking make him feel absolutely daft?

The school was partially to blame. Frederick had never seen anything that shook him to his very soul until he took a position at The Hobbs School for Boys. Within the past three years he'd seen and heard things he had no explanation for, other than a supernatural response to a violent death. The longer he stayed the surer he felt. He'd seen one of the boys himself, seen him climbing into the attic with his head barely hanging on by a thread... laughing and smiling the whole way.

Now this...this *Graham* deemed it necessary to sweep in and make them all feel like naughty children putting on an act. Frederick despised him before they were even introduced, from the moment Dr. Lecter informed the faculty that a thorough investigation was going to be done to disprove the claims made of a haunting at the school. How many voices would it take before anyone was convinced that something terrible was happening? How long until the school received the attention it *truly* needed, not just some once-over by a skeptic?

Shoving some paperwork into a folder, Frederick had worked himself into a particularly foul mood when he heard the classroom door open behind him.

“Alana I know you’re annoyed with me but I’m too busy today to listen to another lecture on my manners.”

“Mm. I’m not Alana, I’m afraid.”

Frederick straightened slowly, reaching out to grip his cane. He turned, eyes narrow. “Mr. Graham.”

“Dr. Chilton,” Will said, nodding respectfully. His eyes were colder than when they’d first been introduced. Good, Chilton had no desire to make a friend of him. “I’m sure you’ll be quite cross at the request, but I need to examine the classroom. I’ve checked all other floors and rooms and this is the last left. I was...hoping you’d be gone for the day by the time I arrived.”

At that Frederick managed a smile. “I’m sure you did. Don’t let me stand in the way of progress, Mr. Graham. Have at it.” He limped to his chair, sinking down into it and immediately busying himself with a towering stack of papers that needed reviewing.

He was immediately distracted by the thoroughness with which Graham examined the room. He expected some casual knocking on walls, pulling books off of bookshelves to check for trap doors, silly things he’d read in sensational novels about murders and mysteries. Instead Will strode back and forth across the floor, touching, feeling, listening, even examining the desks at which the students sat with a calm efficiency. He seemed fairly scientific about it, and quite casual.

“What exactly is it you’re searching for?” Frederick couldn’t help but ask, folding his arms on his desk.

“Anything,” Will said distractedly. “There’s danger in searching with a specific goal in mind, because then I’ll only see what I *want* to see. If I come in expecting nothing then I could find anything.”

Frederick resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Right.”

“You asked,” Will reminded, an amused smile playing in his lips.

"And now I regret it," Frederick said disdainfully. His question had been a half-hearted attempt at making peace, but the moment the words left his mouth he remembered that he desired no peace with Will Graham.

Will dropped a book he'd been examining, turning sharply on his heel. "I'm sorry Dr. Chilton, but I must ask. What exactly is the reason behind your hostility towards me? I feel like any sane, educated man would see the good in the work I do. Why are you so against my being here?"

Chilton studied him, a long, measured look. He wanted to be careful with his words; he despised being misunderstood, loathed people taking his words out of context.

"I dislike you because I dearly love my students, Mr. Graham. These boys spend much of their adolescence here. They see their instructors more than they see their own family members. Can you imagine how phenomenally disconcerting this all must be?" He picked up his cane, examining the polished silver head as he continued. "I respect these boys. Respect them enough to trust what they tell me. I respect myself enough to trust what my own eyes have seen. So when I see fear in their eyes and hear how their voices shake while they tell me what they've experienced? I'm keen to believe them. They deserve to be believed."

Will studied him closely, a dim sort of respect taking root in his chest. "I'm not here to discredit or shame anyone, Dr. Chilton. I'm here to help. If I can figure out who's up to all of this then they can sleep peacefully knowing they're in no danger."

"No danger? I'm sure you've heard how many boys have disappeared already," Chilton said, a bright slice of anger flashing behind his eyes. "I'd say there's a good deal of danger."

"I'm on your side, don't you see that?" Will insisted. "I want the best for them as well, and what's best is to disprove all of this so they can rest easy in their beds at night, go back to focusing on their lessons during the day. They need stability, Dr. Chilton. Not ghost stories."

Chilton stood, relying heavily on his cane as he brushed past Will to stand in the doorway. "An expert on children, as well. How lucky we are to have you here, Mr. Graham." He turned his back to Will, his anger obvious in the rigid line of his shoulders and spine. "Good luck with your search. Don't worry if you see anything suspicious, I'm sure you'll just write it off as indigestion or something of that nature." With one last spiteful glance over his shoulder Chilton left, swinging the door shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Wheee chapter two down! I'm trying to write quickly while maintaining quality, so hopefully nothing comes across as too rushed. Early job hours = not being able to stay up into the wee hours rereading every word. Remember, I'm on tumblr as that-vicious-vixen, come send me head canons to read while I'm bored at work!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

By the time Will retired for the night weariness had settled deep into his bones. He could feel the ache in his overworked muscles, the involuntary tics in his thighs that meant he'd pushed himself too hard. It made sense; he'd spent much of the day moving furniture, climbing walls, taking to the stairs again and again in an effort to find answers. Due to the events of the previous night he'd barely slept, so he was ready to close his eyes and catch up on what he'd missed.

As he sank into bed he closed his eyes, letting himself appreciate every slight sensation as it washed over him. The sheets against his skin were soft, the barest whisper of slippery fabric across his bare chest. The open window let in a soft breeze that ruffled his hair, caressing his cheeks and eyelids. He felt warm, heavy. His limbs sank into the mattress as if pulled by the weight of a long day of questions without answers. As he yawned he arched his back, stretching his limbs out and trying to push all of the soreness and tension as far away as possible.

This was his ritual. Every night the same little motions, the same focus on his sense of self and his sensations. It was the only way to let things go long enough to get some rest.

With one last curl of his toes he closed his eyes, letting sleep wash over him. It came swiftly; a blessed thing after such a long day. Darkness simply curled in from the corners of his senses and he was nearly gone.

The scraping against the wall felt like nails down a chalkboard.

In the work of a moment all hopes of sleep were dashed, replaced by an icy chill in the pit of his stomach. He jerked out of bed, still as death as he listened carefully. It wasn't long before the sound came again. It was soft, a whisper of movement, like a pencil scratching over a fresh sheet of paper. Shhhhhhhk. Shhhhhhhk. Again and again, seeming to begin at the far side of the room near the door before dragging up to where his bed was pushed under the window.

With a racing heart Will pressed his ear to the wall for a closer listen. Minutes passed but no further noise could be heard.

In a moment of uncharacteristic rage Will flung back the covers, dashing out of bed to pull on a pair of trousers. A few swift steps saw him in the hallway; a few more brought him to Chilton's door. Without a slight worry as to the state of the man inside - or anyone else sleeping on the second floor, for that matter - Will brought his fist up, slamming it repeatedly against the door.

There was a moment of silence before shuffling could be heard. The door opened to reveal Chilton looking equal parts baffled and annoyed. "What on earth, Graham?" he spat, bleary-eyed

in the dim light of the moonlit hallway. “I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but the hour is obscene and I already find you to be quite the nuisance.”

Will pushed in, leaving a shocked Chilton in his wake. “I’m on to your game,” he spat, looking at the wall. He strode over, running his finger along the wallpaper. “I don’t know if you think it’s amusing, or if you’re simply a complete and utter *ass*, but I don’t find it the least bit funny.”

Chilton was growing more irate by the moment, cheeks flushed pink. “Either explain yourself or leave.”

“The sound, the *sound*,” Will spat. “Don’t act like you don’t know.”

“I *don’t* know, so do be so kind as to fill me in!”

“The scratching!” Will nearly shouted. “The scratching on the wall. It’s not the least bit amusing and I’d dearly like to get some sleep tonight!”

Chilton’s entire affect changed immediately. Gone was the anger of just moments ago, replaced by...was it pity? He dropped his hands to his sides, smoothing his palms over the fabric of his pyjamas. “Mr. Graham...*Will*. I was asleep. Your knocking woke me up. I dismissed my class early this afternoon as I had a headache and wished to lie down, I’ve been asleep since before the sun even set.”

“Oh I’m quite sure,” Will snapped. “What an easy explanation.”

“Will,” Chilton said firmly, as if reasoning with some hysterical child. “Look at my room. Look at how close the wall is compared to the door. It’s a bizarre feature of the building, there’s a load-bearing wall between our rooms that runs about five feet across. Look at it, Will. Our walls don’t even touch.”

Will turned reluctantly, looking to the wall Chilton spoke of. It was true, its positioning meant that he would never hear such a soft sound coming from this particular room. Someone would have to knock quite hard to get the sound across to Will’s room.

He jumped as a firm hand pressed down on his shoulder. “Maybe you should sit,” Chilton suggested, voice calm. Will immediately did as told, stumbling dazedly over to sit on the edge of the unmade bed. “You said it was a scratching sound?”

“Yes,” Will murmured, staring blankly at the floor. “Starting at one edge of the room and traveling towards the other.”

Chilton nodded as he walked over to his desk. Will couldn’t help but notice his pronounced limp, much more drastic without his cane. “I know the sound well, I hear it often.” He opened a drawer, removing a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. “I’m sorry I can’t offer you ice,” he murmured, pouring a healthy amount before pressing it into Will’s hands. “Drink, you’ll need it if you have any hopes of getting back to sleep tonight.”

Will took a small sip, the burn of alcohol racing down his throat. "I've never been much of a sleeper anyway," he admitted. "I doubt that will get any better while I'm here."

"It isn't exactly an atmosphere conducive to a restful stay," Chilton agreed, sitting in his desk chair. He sized Will up, sipping slowly from his own glass. The detective...was he a detective? Whatever Will was, he looked worn around the edges. His light blue eyes were tinged with red, skin pale and sunken. He had the posture of a man who had given up on taking care of himself. "When you say you've never been much of a sleeper..."

"I'm an insomniac," Will corrected. "I have been for as long as I can remember. I don't recall how I dealt with it as a child, but now I just push through it until I've finished a case. Then I'll section myself off from the world and sleep for days."

"That must make it difficult to solve your mysteries," Chilton said pointedly, raising an eyebrow.

"Sometimes," Will said, clearly uncomfortable with the admission. "I'm persistent. I find ways to soldier on. Anyway, I've got to make my living somehow. I always planned on joining the military but when they didn't take me I had to think of something else."

Chilton looked surprised. "They rejected you? Based on the insomnia?"

"That. and other things," Will said evasively. He took a moment to examine his surroundings, trying to glean who the man before him was based on his living quarters. Frederick, as they seemed to be on first name terms now, lived simply. For a tenured instructor at the school there wasn't much personality to his living space. It had the same furniture that could be found in Will's room; bed, desk, dresser, night table. The only clue that there was a permanent tenant in the room was the staggering amount of books he'd managed to tuck around the room. A few papers were scattered over the desk, probably some grading to be done. He let his eyes linger over the book on the night table before moving on.

There were no picture frames of family or close friends, no nicknacks or signs of life or love. Will couldn't quite grasp the sadness he felt at that.

"Well, consider yourself lucky," Frederick said after a moment. "I did serve, and all I have to show for it is this." He patted his leg, the one he clearly had so much trouble walking on.

Will bit his lip, wondering just how comfortable he was willing to be around this man. He had so many questions, so many things he was absolutely aching to know. About Frederick, about the school, about his coworkers. Yet Frederick had already been so closed off, so openly hostile. Will wasn't one to hold grudges, but who was to say Frederick *wanted* to make peace with him?

Ah, well. He wouldn't get any information by making enemies.

"Where were you stationed?" he asked cautiously.

Frederick stood, collecting Will's empty tumbler to refill. The amber liquid flowed gracefully into the glass, giving him something to focus on other than Will's face. "China," he said after

a long pause. "I was there during the Rebellion. It was all absolutely ridiculous to be honest, I can't say I blame them for wanting us out." This time when he sat it was next to Will on the bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. "They say I'm lucky to have kept the leg at all," he added, no small amount of bitterness creeping into his voice.

Will's next question hung heavy in the air between them. He sat on a knife's edge, balanced somewhere between his fear of being too forward and his curiosity over the man sitting next to him.

"Just ask, Will," Frederick snorted, shifting his weight. The small movement broke Will's reverie, spurring his words.

"How did it happen?"

Frederick sighed softly, looking out the window into the unyielding dark of the night outside. For a moment it seemed as if he would choose to stay silent, let the question hang heavy and awkward between them. Finally he spoke, rubbing his palm over the knee of his good leg.

"I shipped out on May thirty-first, the day after MacDonald called for foreign troops in Beijing. We arrived June third, just in time for the Boxers to cut the rail line in Tianjin and trap us in the city. Everything from that moment on was complete hell. Half of the troops assigned there were guarding the walls protecting the city when some of the Germans caught a rebel and executed him on the spot." He lifted his hand, rubbing it wearily over his eyes. It was clear the memories pained him, as much as he wanted to deny the fact. "Things exploded. A massive group of them rushed the city and started lighting everything on fire. Churches, missions, even homes they thought sympathized with the foreigners." His mouth twisted in a bitter line. "For all of their words on protecting the traditions and people of China, they didn't seem to mind burning their own countrymen down if they had the audacity to side against them."

Will looked down, noticing how Frederick's hands had balled into fists. "If this is upsetting you—"

"It's not," Frederick interjected firmly. "It is simply a thing that happened to me, no great cause of sorrow in my life Mr. Graham." He noticed Will's flinch at the reversion to his surname. "*Will*. Will, I'm sorry," he said, a quick exhalation of breath.

"Anyway. One of the churches had been in the middle of a service. My unit was trying to rescue the people inside while others tried putting out the fires and holding back the anti-imperialists. I was trying to help a man out of the church, but he kept trying to go back in for...something. To be quite honest I never learned what had him so desperate to run back into a burning building. He ran up a staircase and when I followed one of the steps gave out. I went over the side and landed on a pew in just the wrong way, which broke my hip irreparably."

There was a long silence, a signal that Frederick was finished re-living the affair. Will let the quiet stretch on for a moment, finding no discomfort in it as he turned the story over in his head.

Finally, he spoke; “You don’t seem overly critical of the rebellion itself.”

Frederick shrugged, waving a hand dismissively. “I’m not particularly patriotic, if we can be honest with each other. I love my home as much as any other man, but the politics of it all can quite frankly bugger off.”

Will tilted his head. “Is that also why you’re reading *The Intermediate Sex*? As an act of casual protest?”

The book in question, out some six years and very rarely talked about in polite society, had been the cause of quite an uproar as of late. Just because homosexuals couldn’t be stoned to death in the public square anymore didn’t mean that people necessarily *liked* them, so people didn’t necessarily *like* a book arguing that they were just as natural and sane as everybody else. It had only been fourteen years since Wilde died holed up in that prison cell after all.

Frederick flushed immediately, eyes scanning the room for the offending tome. He spotted it on his nightstand, haphazardly hidden under the morning’s newspaper. “It’s interesting, is all,” he stammered. “The politics of sexual deviancy. I’m a scholar you know, it’s good to be well versed, I-”

Will held up a hand, stopping him before he could babble out more excuses. “Relax, Frederick. I told you, my insomnia wasn’t the only reason I was barred from enlisting.”

Wide green eyes turned on him, curious and terrified all in one glance. “You mean to say...”

“Mm,” Will hummed, enough of an answer for the time being. “Do you believe what the book says? That we’re some mythical third gender and it’s completely natural for us to be this way?”

“All I know right now is that I’m profoundly lucky that you spotted the book before anyone else did,” Frederick said, laughing lightly despite the tinge of anxiety still in his voice. He stood, moving the book to a safer hiding place. “How did they even know, when you went to enlist?”

Neither men seemed to want to comment on the oddity of it, the casual way with which this had all come to light.

At his question Will laughed, eyes sparkling at the memory as if it were his fondest one. “Because I’d been caught with the son of the man in charge of recruitment.” Frederick’s stunned look brought another sound of mirth from his lips. “Consider me lucky. He was too mortified to tell anyone other than my father, who was too mortified to do anything other than beat me within an inch of my life. Considering this was sixteen years ago? It could have been much worse.”

Frederick nodded, seemingly stunned by the story. “I was afraid to even kiss another man until I was well past adulthood. I’m sure my father would have turned me out on the streets, no matter how much my mother tried to protect me.”

“I can’t say I’m shocked by that,” Will admitted. “I wasn’t surprised at my father’s wrath. It’s certainly not the way I’d choose to be,”

Frederick gave a small nod, looking quite far away. Will knew that look. It was the same look he wore often, whenever he was faced with the reality of who he was and what his closest friends and family would think if they knew what he felt, what he desired. That look made him remember years of guilt, years of pain, an entire youth spent questioning the validity of his existence.

He stood, placing firm hands on Frederick’s shoulders as he looked him in the eye. “Come now, don’t seem so dour, Dr. Chilton. I suppose there’s no changing the hand we’ve been dealt, so there’s no use in such misery or self-doubt. Nothing to be done but get on with it, which at the moment means figuring out what is haunting this school.”

Frederick nodded, cheeks coloring at Will’s sudden proximity to him. “I suppose you’re right.”

For a long time neither man moved. The silences and pauses of their earlier conversation were nothing compared to this. Will couldn’t help but feel it between them, this new understanding. For all he’d despised Frederick earlier, now he couldn’t help but see him as his one true ally here at the school. For his part Frederick looked like an animal trapped in a cage, desperate to move away but not quite sure how.

“Mr. Graham...”

“Dr. Chilton?”

Just as Frederick opened his mouth to speak the door swung open, causing the two to pull apart as if an electrical current had passed through them.

“What on earth?” Will stalked quickly into the hallway, only to run headlong into Dr. Lecter. “Hannibal,” he sputtered, surprise clear on his face.

“William,” the headmaster responded, breathless and bewildered. “I expect you and Dr. Chilton downstairs immediately.”

Another jolt of electricity, white hot and alarming, ran through his body. *There’s no way he can know...*

“What is the meaning of this?” Frederick asked, face flushed as he joined them in the hall.

Hannibal looked between them, a grave look on his face. “Another boy has gone missing.” He turned on his heel, leaving two shocked men in his wake.

Man I sure did read a whole lot about the Boxer Rebellion for this chapter. As usual this is not proofread because meh, it's fanfiction on the internet. Kudos and comments are sweet kisses from heaven, and come see me on tumblr at that-vicious-vixen!

Chapter 4

Walking to the dining hall was like walking through a dream. Will could see the people around him, could make out their startled faces and the way they flocked together like a group of frightened birds avoiding prey. He could hear them, at least a bit. Voices were muffled; The dull chitter of confusion filled the hall like a swarm of buzzing flies. Any relevant information or observation that landed on him slid right off, discarded on the floor to be trampled over by stampeding students.

It was like watching the scene from above, close enough to witness but too far away to be of any use. Teachers were gathering boys to them, doing headcounts and soothing their worried minds. Will suspected he might do the same, but what comfort could he offer? He was there to perform a job, one he had yet to come *close* to completing. The boys didn't know him, so he had nothing to offer but his own confusion and frustration.

He looked over his shoulder to speak to Frederick, but found the other man was already gone.

The hall held no relief. The noise of fear only grew louder within the confines of the room, pressing in on him from all angles. He could nearly taste it, sharp bitterness on his tongue. Needing as much space as possible he took a seat near the door, watching as Hannibal stood at the front of the hall.

At the polite clearing of his throat each head whipped around, a sea of nervous eyes turned on the headmaster.

"I know everyone is anxious, but we must remain calm," Hannibal said, his gaze unwavering as it swept over the assembly. "Nothing will be solved through hasty action or succumbing to fear. First, we must find Robert." Will assumed this to be the missing boy, the latest in a long *line* of missing boys. "Next, we must ensure that this stops happening. From this moment on no student is to leave the building without accompaniment by a faculty member. When traveling through the building all of you are to have at least one other student with you. There is safety in numbers."

His face was grave as he examined the boys one by one. "I do not say this lightly: at this point we can only assume that each of you is in danger, and I expect you to take that quite seriously. No wandering alone outside, no petty disobedience for disobedience' sake. If you are told to be somewhere or do something you are expected to follow orders without complaint or question. Our goal is your safety, and you must comply if we are to achieve it."

Will swallowed hard, swayed by the words. He looked from Alana, to Price, to Zeller, to Frederick; the latter was standing in front of a large window, framed by night as he watched Hannibal with a stony expression.

What was he thinking? What were any of them thinking?

*

The walk back to his sleeping quarters proved to be just as chaotic as the walk to the dining hall. In an attempt to stem the flow of chatter pressing in on him he chose a back route, a hallway rarely used but for staff and particularly adventurous students looking for a place to hide from responsibilities. It was fairly empty but still clean; the wait staff prided themselves on their work and left no stone unturned when dusting and sweeping the school. Despite being unoccupied there were still candles lit, casting a glow that bathed Will in golden light and warmed his skin despite the chill air.

It had been nearly three days and he had found nothing. No hidden passageways, no mysterious figures lurking the halls, no students willing to talk to him about what they'd seen. Just a bit of dried blood in the attic and mysterious noises that haunted him each night.

He hadn't even seen a damn ghost. They could at least have the decency to show themselves.

Stopping in the middle of the hall, Will moved to lean against the wall. He would have to redouble his efforts. There had to be something he'd missed, some small thread that would help him unravel everything. With a sigh he closed his eyes, resting his head back and clearing his mind.

What was he not seeing?

Gently, gently, like water kissing the stones of a riverbed, he felt fingers slide down his arm. His eyes opened to an empty hallway, devoid of even the barest presence of life. No mice scurrying by, no moth fluttering on the windowsill. He was alone.

"And now you're imagining things," he muttered angrily to himself, shaking his head.

And then it happened again. A soft, tickling movement, tangible enough to dimple the fabric of his shirt as he looked down to his arm. Now the sensation didn't stop at his wrist, instead winding through his fingers. It was as if a tiny hand was grasping at his...

Will felt a churning in his stomach, like a great sea tossed and turned by hurricane winds. His mouth was dry, skin breaking out in millions of little bumps that made his hair stand on end.

Don't be foolish. You've seen this before, this high suggestibility. Multiple times in fact. The day was long and fraught with emotion, and you know you're feeling particularly tired. It's easy for the mind to create phantoms in the dark, especially when you're looking to see them...

"Right. Right. There's nothing there," he breathed firmly, nodding his head.

Before his curls even had time to stop bouncing from the movement, three things happened. First, each light in the room was simultaneously snuffed out. He could hear the soft whistling that came with it, as if a single breath had done the deed. At the same time the door closest to him flew open. Before it had even banged against the wall something grabbed his feet, yanking him violently into the room.

The latter proved to be quite painful. An invisible force seemed to jerk his feet out from under him, bringing him hard to the ground. His palms slammed against the floor, quickly

followed by his face. As he was swiftly dragged into the darkness of the now-open room he scratched frantically at the floorboards, trying to gain some sort of purchase to get himself away. Still, in he went, the door swinging shut after him.

He was immersed in darkness. With his heart pounding in his chest he stood, adrenaline forcing his limbs and filling him with the knowledge that he needed to run.

Still, wasn't this what he was looking for? Trying to ignore the sound of blood racing in his ears he stilled himself, breathing deeply through his nose. "Who's there?" he whispered, feeling quite foolish at the question. Naturally no response came.

"Listen, I'm here to help you. Just tell me who you are and I'll get you help." It was a student playing a trick on him, that was all. Some well-thought out trick utilizing his weariness and poor eyesight to convince him of invisible monsters. "You're not in any sort of trouble, just tell me what you need."

"*Look harder...*"

He felt another tug at his hand, and quickly decided that ghosts were probably fully capable of helping themselves. Dashing through the darkness he felt his way to the door, throwing it open and running into the hallway.

Before he got far a pair of strong hands grabbed him, pressing him carefully against the wall.

"What the *hell* is...Frederick!"

The man standing before him looked stunned, forest-green eyes wide and brimming with concern. "What on earth happened to you? I didn't see you return to your room and wanted to make sure you were alright, I was coming from the dormitories when I heard something slamming about. Will, *your nose is bleeding.*"

With the danger seemingly over, Will felt filled with an odd sort of white noise. The excitement ebbing from him took his energy with it. His limbs felt slow, foolish. He let his arms hang uselessly by his sides as he met Frederick's eyes.

"I think your ghost has it out for me, Frederick."

Frederick's face settled on a sort of worried agitation. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, folding it in half before carefully wiping blood off of Will's cheeks and chin. "You're an absolute mess, Mr. Graham," he admonished. "Didn't you hear the headmaster say we weren't supposed to be galavanting about on our own?"

Will laughed deliriously, far too focused on the way Frederick's body had him crowded against the wall. "I'm not a student or teacher here, *Dr. Chilton*," he replied with no small amount of sarcasm. "Are you even listening to me? *I was attacked by something I couldn't see.* Isn't that what you wanted? Proof of some supernatural nonsense lurking the hallways?" He gave a sort of manic laugh, eyes bright behind his crooked glasses.

Frederick frowned, eyebrows knit together. “Isn’t this what I wanted? You’re *bleeding* Will. I wouldn’t have wanted that a few days ago when I loathed you.” Frederick studied him for a moment before swallowing hard, sliding the fabric over Will’s lips to collect the blood that had dripped down.

Immediately all thoughts of ghosts were swept from his mind. Instead Will was fully aware of the softness running across his mouth, of Frederick’s warm fingers just behind the fabric. He let his eyes slide out of focus, looking somewhere over Frederick’s shoulder as his body honed in on the sensation. This was certainly not casual behavior for two men barely more than acquaintances. Will could feel the intimacy in the action, the trepidation and fear in Frederick’s movement. At the last pass of cloth over skin Frederick tucked the handkerchief back into his palm, thumb sliding over the dry skin at the corner of Will’s lips.

“There,” he whispered, barely daring to break the silence between them. “You’re slightly more put together than when I found you.”

With a fast tug at the front of Frederick’s shirt Will brought him close, sealing their mouths together.

It had been far too long since he’d been kissed, far too long since he’d felt a solid body pressed firmly to his. After a moment of shock he could feel Frederick molding into him, could sense the way the tension and self-consciousness melted away into a warm armful of loose muscles and eager lips. It was divine. Gone were all thoughts of ghosts and ghouls and demons, replaced with the way their mouths seemed to fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. Frederick’s lips were softer than he’d expected, his warmth and scent dizzying.

All too soon Frederick pulled away, slightly breathless.

“I knew you’d be my undoing, from the moment I saw you,” he breathed, stroking his fingers along Will’s angled jaw. It was like a prayer whispered between them, like a secret even greater than who they were and what they felt. It was brutal, beautiful truth, whispered directly into his soul.

Will hummed a sort of agreement, bringing a hand up to cup the back of Frederick’s neck. He lightly stroked questing fingers along his hairline, attempting to regain his senses. “I swear, I would never do anything to jeopardize you...”

Frederick smirked, raising an eyebrow. “Not intentionally, at least.” He leaned in, stealing another kiss before pulling away completely. Will groaned at the absence. “To bed, Mr. Graham. You’ve still got a job to do, you’ll need to be in top form tomorrow.”

With one more kiss and a fond glance Frederick turned, disappearing down the hall and leaving a startled but pleased Will alone in the darkness.

*

The sun chose to show its cowardly face the next morning, shining bold and bright over the grounds of the school. Will sat on the front steps with a biscuit and jam held carefully in front of him. He couldn’t handle the dining room that morning; too many stricken faces, too many

whispered conspiracies as everyone dealt with the news of the latest disappearance. He needed time to clear his head and regroup.

Today was the day to search the gardens and what lay beyond them. The marshes were thick and wild, they could very well be the place wandering boys were kidnapped and whisked away into oblivion. A small part of him dreaded what he might find - he'd never been much of an outdoorsman, the gloom and damp and dark of the swamp made his stomach churn. Far too many places to hide bodies.

Still, he had to be sure.

Once he was done with his hasty breakfast he dusted his hands of crumbs, standing and doing the same for his shirt and pants. He'd been so much more preoccupied with his grooming and dress that morning (one never knew when one might run into the object of one's desires). Feeling almost guilty to be thinking of Frederick at a time like this, he set out to explore the sprawling lawn of Hobbs.

The gardening was a sight to behold. Large hedges lined the front lawn, quite a feat for the conditions they had to grow in. The grass Will stepped on was healthy and green, seeming to bounce under his feet. This wasn't the type of grass you'd get to enjoy in London, if you got to enjoy any at all. It was lush, verdant. The morning sunlight sparkled off of the dew, giving everything a dreamlike quality that served no purpose but to make Will feel more anxious than he already was.

He hated surrealism.

He quickly decided that there wasn't much to see in the front garden. Everything was clearly visible, just a long driveway, a fountain, and rose gardens under the ground level windows. Giving it one more good scan with his eyes he turned, making his way to the back of the property.

What he found was just as impressive and well maintained as what he saw in the front. The very back end of the lawn ended in a lake, one he'd been told was used for swim practice and rowing. Beyond that the thickness of the trees started in immediately, blocking any further view from his vision. If he stood with his back to the school he could see the groundskeeper's small cottage to the west, a small shed for storing supplies and sporting equipment to the east, and plenty of croquet wickets all throughout the yard. Hobbs had a strict regimen of exercise, keeping the boys active and fit. Many were looking at the prospect of a draft, what with England being on the verge of war...it only made sense to keep them prepared physically.

Will's first point of order was to explore the shed. He stepped off to the right, breathing in the damp air and the lurid petrichor of the grass. It really was quite a lovely area, if you enjoyed soggy earth and insects the size of your fist. The sunshine gave the land a vibrancy he hadn't yet to experienced in his time there. Everything felt lighter, more important. He was quite sure that if he kept his wits about him and didn't run into any...distractions...this would be the day he put everything together.

The shed was surprisingly ramshackle when compared to the school it serviced. Rotting wood creaked and groaned as he opened the door, as if it alone knew the conditions of the

world around it; as if it knew the secrets it had the potential to hide. Inside was a swirling chaos of dust, clearly the shed itself was rarely exposed to fresh air or light.

“Well, there’s apparently one place they forget to dust,” Will coughed, waving his hand in front of his face to defend his air passages from the grime. A perfunctory glance told him all he needed to know about the little storage space; absolutely nothing. There was not enough space inside for any wrong doing, and the simple construction of the building wouldn’t allow for any secret rooms or tunnels. It truly was nothing more than a shed, holding field hockey sticks, weights, and other various exercise equipment.

Walking out, Will slammed the door much harder than he needed to. Damned shed. Damned school. Damned ghosts.

The last place to check was the groundskeeper’s house. He hadn’t heard much about the man who tended to the lawns; only that he was a quiet, reserved man named Peter, and that he was fairly nervous around new people. Alana had warned Will that he kept to himself. She’d seemed quite adamant about it too, as if to warn Will against bothering the man. Still, he had to be questioned just as everyone else was.

Striding across the lawn in long steps meant to get all this over with much sooner, Will quickly found himself in front of the door of the small, well-kept building. It was simple enough - a wooden door, a small window next to it, a thatched roof. There was a little rose bush under the window, small but obviously well loved. The petals were open, blushing in the morning sunshine.

Drawing in a deep breath, Will rapped his knuckles against the door.

Ten seconds. Twenty seconds. Thirty.

Nothing.

With a frown he knocked again. He was quite sure he hadn’t seen the man inside today, at breakfast or otherwise lurking about the grounds. He certainly wasn’t working in the gardens, so where else might he be? Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, Will knocked again. Still nothing.

With a sigh, he considered his options. He could find some paper in the school, leave a note for the absent groundskeeper to find him immediately...but he always hated giving people prior warning of his arrival. If gave them far too much time to hide things they may not wish him to see. No, he’d have to return at a later hour, catch him by surprise.

Will turned, immediately running into Hannibal Lecter.

“Oh! Damn,” he gasped, immediately finding himself supported by strong hands. “Ah, Hannibal. I do apologize,” he murmured, eyes cast down. “I didn’t hear you join me.”

“No apologies necessary,” Hannibal said smoothly, studying Will’s face. “I didn’t see you at breakfast this morning.” Despite Will’s balance returning he kept the slighter man in his grasp.

“No, I stepped out to clear my mind,” Will said, cheeks filling with an anxious flush. The color started somewhere below the collar of his stiff white shirt, seeping past his neck and into his face. “There’s so much noise and speculation right now, I didn’t want the students worry and excitement to color my mental state.”

“I understand,” Hannibal said, finally offering a smile. “Did you find Peter in good spirits?”

“I didn’t find Peter at all,” Will admitted. “I’ll have to call on him later. Do you have any idea where he might be?”

“None at all,” Hannibal said dismissively. “He comes and goes as he pleases. A few years back he suffered an injury that was quite debilitating for him. As long as he performs his duties we try not to impose too many restrictions on him. He has a rough enough time as is.”

Without pause, without any indication that the move was out of the ordinary, Hannibal brushed Will’s hair back gently before dropping his hands to his sides. “Allow me to accompany you back inside?” he said, smiling warmly.

Will swallowed hard, trying desperately to not show his confusion or to flinch from the touch. “Of course.”

Hannibal gestured to the main building, letting Will step forward before falling in stride next to him. “I doubt you’ll find anything of much interest in Peter’s living space,” he said after a moment of silence. “The dear boy is one of the most innocent creatures I’ve ever met. He dearly loves animals, so much that he scratched together enough money to adopt the horse that put him in his current state. He wanted to be sure nothing bad would happen to it.” Hannibal opened the door that led into the back hall, following Will in. “While I won’t intrude on your investigation in any way, I would almost be bold enough to ask you to leave him out of all of this. Every new disappearance is a great emotional strain on him.”

Will nodded, head seeming to fill with an odd sort of fog. Something seemed off. Even taking the familiar, fond sort of touch out of the equation, something about this interaction was setting him quite on edge. “I am ever at your service, Hannibal. Whatever you wish of me, I will endeavour to obey.”

Hannibal awarded him another smile, stopping before they reached the common areas of the building. “Good man. Has everyone been treating you well during your stay?”

“Quite,” Will assured him, blinking in an attempt to clear his head. “Everyone has been willing to aid me in my search, they’re as eager as I to get to the bottom of this.”

“And Dr. Chilton...he’s shown you no extraordinary rudeness?”

Will could almost feel his skin going pale. “None,” he said, voice tight in his throat. “None at all. At first he was wary of my methods and my purpose here, but I dare say he’s come around since then.”

Hannibal nodded, a grave look on his face. He reached forward, taking Will’s hands in his own. “It is of the utmost importance that everyone shows you respect during your stay. Do

you swear you'd tell me of any discomfort, any abuse you might suffer while here?"

"I swear," Will murmured, voice low. He felt as though his skin didn't quite fit him properly, like it was a suit tailored to another man. "I greatly appreciate your kindness, it's been most reassuring."

Hannibal stepped forward, eyes trained on Will's face. Will was crowded against the wall now, seeming to shrink in the headmaster's presence. His heart beat hard in his chest, palms flat against the wall behind him.

"Dr. Lecter..."

Hannibal opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps. "Right then," he said, quickly stepping back and smoothing down his tie. "I do hope to continue this conversation later." With a knowing smirk he turned on his heel, striding away in the direction of his office.

Will slid down the wall, knees useless as he found himself in a jumbled heap on the ground.

Just down the hall, out of the corner of his eye, he heard a small boy giggle. When he turned to look he saw nothing but shadows and silence.

*

Will had begun to doubt that the mystery surrounding the school would ever begin to make sense to him. As he holed himself in his room, locking the door tight behind him, his mind swirled under an onslaught of questions and thoughts and curiosities. What was Hannibal up to, so brazenly coming on to him in a place where anyone could see? Who would be the next boy to go missing? What was the school hiding? What was he going to do about Frederick?

A small flare of a headache had begun at the base of his skull, radiating out to his temples. He closed his eyes tight, trying to quell it through the sheer force of his will. It never took this long for him to get to the bottom of things, never. How could he search an entire school from top to bottom and find nothing but some damned dried blood? And how did a school stay open under so much scandal?

Will sat on the bed, resting his back against the wall and letting his feet dangle over the edge. The headache was growing in power and pain. With a groan he clenched his teeth together, gently knocking his head against the wall again and again.

And then he stopped.

Because load-bearing walls did not sound hollow. When you knocked on them they gave a dull *thud*, a sound that carried over to the next room but did not reverberate very much at all. This wall did not. This wall gave an empty sort of *thunk, thunk, thunk*. He turned, rapping with his knuckles and waiting. Sure enough, that same hollow sound. The walls vibrated enough that the portrait hanging about his bed shifted.

“You...what are you?” he whispered, eyes wide.

Vaulting out of bed, he unlocked the door and ran into the hallway. In a few excited steps he was at Frederick’s door, pounding with his open palm.

Frederick answered a moment later, wide eyed and anxious. “What in God’s name is the matter, Will?”

“The wall! It’s not what you said it is,” he said triumphantly, dashing over to the side of the room adjacent to his own. “It’s not bearing any weight, the space between our rooms is *empty*. Why would it be empty with no doors, no access, no use at all? Why would they build some pointless empty space into the architecture of the house?”

Frederick watched him, a look of utter confusion on his face. “Why?”

“I don’t know!” Will crowed triumphantly. He jumped onto Frederick’s bed, knocking on the wall again and again. Hollow. Hollow, hollow, hollow. “I don’t know what this means, but it’s important. I need to know what’s behind this wall.” He thought for a moment, face falling. “I need to know what’s behind this wall without Hannibal knowing that I know.”

Frederick looked at him wide-eyed. “Hannibal? What’s he done?”

“More than I know, I’m sure,” Will muttered, recalling their earlier dalliance in the hallway. “I had a feeling earlier, and my feelings are seldom wrong. There’s something he doesn’t want me to know, and he’s overly eager to have me on his side. He’s up to something.”

Frederick was silent for a moment, considering this. “I saw him touching your hair earlier. Looking out the window. I was...it was concerning,” he said dismissively, failing to hide the hint of jealousy in his voice. “I’m glad to hear you found it off-putting.” After a moment he gasped. “He’ll be gone on Saturday. Some of the boys need to go in town to see the doctor, and he offered to accompany them so he could make some purchases. He should be gone all day.”

Will turned, a radiant smile on his face. “This is it, Frederick. Whatever is going on in this school, whatever the dead boys are trying to tell us, it’s got to be behind this wall.”

“Whatever the dead boys are trying to tell us,” Frederick repeated slowly. “So...so you believe now.”

“Well...how can you not?” Will asked, a look of confusion now gracing his own face.

With a triumphant smile Frederick leaned in, kissing him hard.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hoo boy, this one took me a while to get out. Tired Alley = no brain for writing sex. But hey here it is! The next chapter will DEFINITELY not take as long as this one did. Pinky promise!

Some things I learned a lot about while writing this chapter; the history of men's underwear. The history of femoral sex in pre-WWI London. The history of K-Y Jelly. So yes, what Frederick says about lube is true, it was invented in 1904. Bring that little tidbit home to mom and dad.

As always, find me on tumblr [here](#)!

“Have you ever done anything like this before?”

Will could feel his thighs trembling as long fingers slid over his heated skin. It wasn't cold, not in the burning heat surrounding their bodies, yet he felt his flesh raise in goosebumps as if he'd been doused in cold water. He was spread out on the bed, naked from the waist up, trousers undone but still on as Frederick slid his hand along the planes of his body. Frederick himself was still clothed, though his shirt was unbuttoned and pushed open to reveal tan skin and a dark dusting of hair along his chest.

“No, never anything quite like this, never in a bed at least,” he whispered hoarsely. He didn't fear being heard, only that speaking too loudly might ruin the sanctuary they'd created with the bed and their bodies. “I mean, I've been with men before, back home, but...this is different.”

Frederick nodded, eyes sliding along Will's bared torso as his palm stroked over his stomach. “I know what you mean,” he murmured, eyes dark with arousal and anticipation. “Neither have I.” With those words hanging between them he leaned in, pressing their lips together in a chaste kiss that still managed to send tremors down to Will's toes. It was soft, barely there; just a hint of skin on skin, the tips of their noses lightly brushing together as they opened their eyes. Will felt completely paralyzed, pinned by the fire in Frederick's gaze.

“Will, if this makes you uncomfortable, if you change your mind,” Frederick began, pressing their foreheads together.

“I won't. I swear I won't,” Will interrupted quickly, raising a hand to stroke Frederick's cheek. “I want this. Don't you?”

“More than anything,” Frederick breathed. This time when he kissed Will it was not chaste. Their lips crushed together in a sort of frenzy, as if they were both fully aware of the danger they were putting themselves in just by being together in a time such as this. Still, neither quailed at the idea of being caught - only at the knowledge that they might not have much time, and that they had to give each moment they had together every ounce of passion they possessed in them.

Will pressed a palm to Frederick’s chest, pushing him firmly back to splay out across the mattress. Swinging his leg over, he could already feel the beginnings of Frederick’s arousal as he straddled his hips. “This needs to go,” he murmured, pushing the open shirt off of Frederick’s shoulders and letting it drop to the ground. It left him with a new expanse of skin to explore, his mouth going dry at the sight of bare skin and dusky pink nipples.

“I intend on putting my lips to every inch of you,” Will murmured seriously, setting out to do just that.

He was delighted to find Frederick quite sensitive and receptive, unafraid of voicing his desires or his pleasure as Will explored his skin with questing lips. A gentle kiss just behind his ear made him sigh softly, eyes fluttering shut. Will’s mouth exploring the tender flesh of his wrist and then up to his inner elbow had him whimpering and squirming slightly underneath. When Will gently bit with sharp white teeth just below his navel he cried out, hips lifting off of the bed to encourage the blessed torture.

“Will, ah Will,” he breathed, the words falling from his lips like a sigh. He brought a hand up, slipping his fingers through dark curls and stroking down to the back of Will’s neck. “Your mouth...from the moment I saw you walk in I couldn’t stop thinking about your mouth...”

“Mhm,” Will hummed, kissing the gentle softness of his stomach. He could feel the muscle underneath, the soldier hidden under years of comfortable living and reliance on a cane. He nuzzled along the trail of hair leading past the waist of Frederick’s trousers, breathing him in. “From the moment I saw you I found you completely insufferable,” he teased, stroking his palm along trembling thighs. “You’ll be pleased to know my opinion of you has changed greatly.”

Frederick snorted, laughing breathlessly. “Oh, I’m glad I found my way into your esteem, Mr. Graham,” he said, tugging gently at Will’s hair. “You’re quite the romantic.”

“I know, it’s my dearest gift and my greatest curse,” Will said loftily. He returned to the body before him, nuzzling along Frederick’s hip. “I’d quite like to feel you against me,” he murmured, hiding his face against Frederick’s chest to hide his blush. He shivered when the grip on his hair tightened. “On top of me.”

“You’re sure?” Frederick moaned, voice thick and languid like cigarette smoke curling from between parted lips. Will’s only response was to slide up, sealing their mouths together once more. Tongues swept lazily against each other, exploring hidden spots of pleasure in each other’s mouths. “Alright, yes,” Frederick breathed once they parted, sliding shaking hands along Will’s back and down to cup his ass. “Yes we can absolutely do that. But first I think we need to be completely undressed.”

Frederick rolled their bodies, easily pinning Will's hands to the mattress. A stern look clearly said *leave them there*. Will obeyed easily as warm hands slid down his chest. Frederick had a look akin to wonder on his face - he was quite sure he'd never seen someone as lovely, from the freckles scattered across Will's cheeks and the bridge of his nose to the jagged scar that ran across his stomach. He traced the scar with light touches before leaning in to repeat the action with his lips and tongue. "Beautiful, battered boy," he whispered reverentially. "Where on earth did this come from?"

"Not everyone likes what I have to say," Will said, soft and low. "Some get angrier than others."

At that Frederick made a noise of disapproval, as if he wished to protect Will from all the monsters of his past. But monsters weren't real; men were real, with their violent hands and sharp knives and angry voices. But they weren't here, this wasn't their time. This was the time for questing hands and whispered promises and all the pleasure they could provide one another.

He could feel the way Frederick's fingertips trembled. They almost seemed to avoid the tenting in his pants, instead focusing on undoing the buttons that hid him from view. Once they were undone he easily lifted his hips, helping to slide the trousers off before they repeated the action with his drawers. Soon he was splendidly naked, legs slightly spread and arms flung above him as he was put on display.

"Oh, Will," Frederick murmured, lightly grazing his fingers along the inside of Will's thighs. "Oh, you are *divine*."

Will's cock was a bit longer than average, thin and curving just slightly to the left. Frederick wrapped his palm carefully around the straining flesh, just barely pulsing his hand around it in time with the ticking of his own heart. Dark green eyes flickered up curiously as Will moaned, spreading his legs wider. Encouraged, Frederick slid his hand up to thumb lightly under the head.

"Is that good? Ah, Will, you're so lovely," Frederick breathed, an almost pained expression gracing his handsome features as he got used to the shape and weight of Will's erection in his hand. "Tell me what you need..."

Will groaned, hair splaying out over the pillow as his head fell to the bed. "More, I need more," he gasped, thighs tensing. "Do you have any sort of lubricant? Oil? Anything?"

Frederick nodded, getting up and walking stiffly to his little desk against the opposite wall. After rifling around a drawer for a moment he found a small tin, carrying it back to the bed. Tossing it next to Will, he began shucking off his trousers.

Will picked up the curious thing, looking at it with interest. "What on earth is this?"

"K-Y Jelly," Frederick informed, climbing naked into the bed next to him. "It's fairly new, they use it in surgeries. I may or may not have found an alternate use for it, though I'd rather you didn't ask me how I obtained the sample." With a grin he took the tin, unscrewing the lid and tossing it onto his bedside table. Dipping his fingers into the thick, clear substance he slid

it between his fingers to warm it as best he could. Once he had coated the inside of his hand he reached down, easily sliding his fist along Will's shaft.

"Oh...oh yes," Will breathed, squirming. "Oh, that's quite nice..."

"God bless modern medicine," Frederick said, voice low as he leaned in to kiss along Will's jaw. His hand moved easily along Will's length, wrist twisting with every upstroke. When Will would start to lose control, bucking and thrusting into his hand, he'd let go and smirk as the pathetic whine he'd get in return. "We have all night," he whispered against hot skin, reaching down to fondle his sac. "Just relax, let me take care of you..."

"We're in a haunted school where people keep disappearing and I'm beginning to suspect the headmaster is behind it," Will groaned, eyebrows knit. "Also, our country is on the brink of war. And I had a bit of a headache this morning. I wouldn't look at time as something that's promised to us."

"Fair enough," Frederick agreed, laughing breathlessly. At Will's urging he slid on top of him, lining their hips up and giving an experimental thrust. "L-like that?"

Will gave a low whine, eyelids fluttering shut. "O-oh yes, just like that." He let himself focus on that one sensation, shutting everything else out in favor of the beautiful slide of their aching lengths as they thrust together. The lubricant Frederick used made the motions easy, just enough friction to feel lovely but not enough to hurt. Long legs slotted together, hands finding every opportunity to touch and feel and explore without breaking the rhythm of their movements. They were utterly lost in the heat and haze hanging low over them.

Sliding a hand between them, Frederick wrapped loose fingers around their shafts. The grip was messy, no real finesse as they thrust in and out of the circle of his hand, which made it feel all the more exquisite.

"I would take any number of horrors," Frederick panted, eyebrows knit, "just to earn this pleasure with you."

Will opened his eyes, dazed and flushed as he looked up at Frederick. A thousand different vulnerabilities were written across his face; who he was, who he had been. The lurking fear of who he might some day become. But here, now, none of it mattered.

He slid his hands down, nails just digging into Frederick's skin as he gripped at his hips. "Frederick, oh Frederick," Will choked, looking for all the world like he'd just run a marathon. Damp hair stuck to his forehead and the back of his neck, skin flushed from his cheeks all the way down to his chest. "I need...oh God I need..."

"What?" Frederick hissed, leaning in to nip and suck at his earlobe. "Tell me, Will, tell me what you need..."

"I need more, I need to come," Will begged, voice strained. Within a moment he was whining high in his throat, trying to reach for Frederick as he pulled away.

“Relax, I have you,” Frederick said, chest heaving as he smoothed Will’s curls off of his face. After leaning in for a languid kiss he moved down the bed, wrapping swollen lips around the head of Will’s cock and sucking firmly.

It was all Will could do not to scream his ecstasy for the entire school to hear. Frederick’s mouth was hot and sweet, head bobbing over Will’s lap as he took more and more each time. Sure hands found their way to Will’s sac, cupping and fondling in time with the beautiful agony of his mouth. Will was quite sure he could see the edges of his vision going dark, it was all too much. He wound his fingers into Frederick’s dark hair, twisting it in his grip and trying for all he was worth to hold on.

“Please please please,” he whispered, sinking even white teeth into his lip.

Frederick pulled off, lips making an obscene sound. “Come on darling, come for me,” he cooed, fisting Will’s dick with expert strokes. “It’s alright, you can let go.”

Will didn’t need any further urging. Bringing his hand up to bite his fist and stifle his moans, he shuddered right to his toes as he spilled into Frederick’s hand. It was a slow burn, starting low in his stomach and rolling up his spine before spreading back down to his feet. His skin felt alight - everything was blazing, everything was beautiful. With one more gasp he moaned Frederick’s name, shivering before slumping back onto the bed.

Frederick stroked him gently through his climax, letting go just before it became too much. “Sweet, beautiful boy,” he murmured, wiping his hand on the sheets before leaning in to kiss softly along Will’s stomach. “Perfect, lovely man...”

Will whimpered, drawing the back of his hand across his eyes. “Nng...mm, Frederick...”

Frederick slid up, dragging sloppy kisses along his shoulder. “I could spend days in this bed with you...”

“I think we might give ourselves away, if that were the case,” Will slurred, pulling him in for a lazy kiss. “Could I offer you a Princeton First-Year, Dr. Chilton?”

Frederick laughed, reaching for the slick to coat his own erection. “Sounds lovely, Mr. Graham.” This time when he straddled Will it was with his legs on the outside of Will’s, Will’s knees pressed together. Taking a deep breath, he eased his length between the slick skin of Will’s thighs.

“That alright?” Will moaned, toes curling.

“It’s more than alright, it’s perfection,” Frederick gasped in response, thrusting between his thighs. It was just tight enough to be good, just hot enough to make his head spin and his breath come in short gasps. Getting Will off had been nearly enough to send him over the edge himself; now this, this tight, perfect heat, it was doing him in.

Reaching up with shaking hands, Will ran his fingers through Frederick’s hair. He was enraptured, caught up in all the little faces and sounds he made as he got off between his

thighs. Will squirmed against him, trying to change the sensation; his hand slid down, running his thumb along Frederick's bottom lip.

"Am I dreaming you up?" he breathed, barely audible even with mere inches between them.

"I hope not," Frederick choked, eyebrows knit. His hips began to stutter, losing rhythm. The sounds escaping his mouth were becoming more and more frantic, more and more pained. With a helpless shout that made Will's heart skip a beat he thrust forward, stilling as he came on Will's hot skin.

"Yes, just like that," Will breathed, leaning up to kiss him firmly. He could feel Frederick's muscles, tight and shaking, the way his back and shoulders tensed and flexed with his orgasm. The moans filling the room were obscene, Will could live off of nothing but those sounds and die a happy man.

Soon there was nothing but silence, and two shaking bodies tangling together in the darkness of the room.

"I should go back to my own bed, I can't risk exposing you," Will whispered, eyes soft as he ran his fingers over Frederick's cheek and down the side of his neck.

"Stay," Frederick insisted, barely visible save for the fierce burning glow of his eyes as he looked at Will. They had ended up laying beside each other, one of Will's legs hooked over Frederick's, hands wound lazily as they caught their breath and cooled their bodies. "We'll be careful in the morning, if anyone sees you I'll tell them you had questions about one of the rooms in the building. Stay."

And so Will stayed.

*

"Will."

Will stirred slightly, moaning in his half-sleeping state.

"Will? Will, wake up!"

"Frederick, last night was indescribable but I *will* take it as a personal insult if you attempt to wake me up before sunrise."

"*Will!*"

With a groan he rose, squinting in the pre-dawn darkness for something he could gag Frederick with. He turned, met with the sight of Frederick sleeping soundly beside him.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Mr. Graham," the voice said softly from the foot of the bed.

He turned slowly, eyes going wide. Standing before him was a boy; not too tall, not too short, of average height and little consequence - except for, of course, the long strips of flesh that seems to have been expertly cut from his skin. They had been removed in four neat sections,

long rectangles starting at his pectorals and moving all the way down just above his hips. The muscle underneath had been removed, his ribs, organs, and other such viscera suspended in place by Will knew not what.

His hair was wet, dripping, although there was no fallen moisture on the floor at his feet. There was no shadow cast from the light of the moon falling across him. In the darkness Will could just barely see that he was a bluish, greenish color, and that his lips were a sickly sort of purple.

He looked at Will apologetically, wringing his hands before him. "I hate to be rude, but I need your help Mr. Graham."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Will's heart leapt into his throat, his head spinning viciously as he tried to process what he was seeing. "You're not real," he choked, kicking his way up to sit at the top of the bed, as far from the apparition as he could get. His heart pounded somewhere in the vicinity of his throat, every hair covering his arms and legs standing up in terror. "You're not real, I won't be tormented by something that doesn't exist." Next to him Frederick stirred slightly, unconsciously seeking Will's form that was moments ago beside him on the bed. Will longed to still be sleeping, longed for this to be some horrid dream.

The boy looked mortified, holding his hands up in a placating sort of gesture. "Please, please Mr. Graham! I'm sorry to startle you, I just...I know you're here trying to find us, so I thought maybe I could find the energy to see you myself, to speak to you in...in person..."

Will felt as if he could vomit. He grabbed a pillow, holding it tight to his stomach as a weak sort of barrier. "Which...which one are you?" he whispered, voice trembling as he tried to get the words out.

"Daniel," he replied softly. It was bizarre; Will could hear his words, could hear his answers clear as day, but the boy's lips didn't seem to move. No actual sound filled the dark and silent space, but Will could still *hear* him, as if the words simply appeared in his head.

Frederick stirred again, slowly opening his eyes. "Will? What's wrong?" he yawned, reaching up to stroke his arm. As he registered the terror on his lover's face he sat up, eyes growing wider. "Will, what is it?"

"We have a visitor," Will said softly, eyes not moving from the boy standing at the foot of their bed.

Frederick looked at him in confusion, taking in Will's pale complexion and wild eyes before turning to see what haunted him so. For a moment he saw nothing; simply the dark swirling around them, occasionally broken up by beams of moonlight and glittering motes of dust. Then, gradually, like someone stepping out of a shadow, there was a boy in various states of ruin. Frederick sat up quickly, eyes going just as wide as Will's. "Daniel," he choked, hand over his heart.

"Dr. Chilton," the boy acknowledged, sad and polite. "Can you help me?"

"What do you need? What do we *do*?" Will managed to ask. If it weren't for the pounding of his heart and the painful grip of Frederick's hand on his own he might think he was simply dreaming. But he *knew*, knew in his gut that this was real.

"I...I don't know where I am," Daniel said, voice the sound of wind rustling tree-tops and owls calling to each other in the night. "I know it's very cold...and very dark. I know he has

killed me. But Mr. Graham, I want to go home to my parents. Can you find me and bring me to them?"

"Who killed you, Daniel?" Will asked urgently. "Who did this to you? Tell me, we can *stop* him before he hurts anyone else..."

Daniel looked pained, face twisting and crumpling as if he might cry. Will was struck by how young he was - the boy couldn't have been more than thirteen or fourteen when he died. And here he was, no longer living, no longer anything more than a terrible nightmare and a body to be found. He was no longer of this mortal coil, yet he still found the courage to push through this dark and terrible thing to find help. Will would be forever amazed by the bravery of children.

"I don't know," Daniel finally said miserably. "I don't know. It's dark, Mr. Graham. It's dark and it's wet and I'm cold."

"Daniel, try very hard." Frederick's voice was clear beside Will, warming him and giving him the courage he had lost. "Close your eyes and think, think about where you've been and what you've seen..."

"I still don't know how this works," Daniel replied, voice high and childish. "I had to concentrate very hard so you could see me, hear me. Sometimes I can move things, open doors and push people about." Will's mind flickered to the other night in the hallway, the phantom grip pulling him into the darkened classroom. "But I don't know where I *am*. I think...I think I'm everywhere now."

"Daniel I need to know who killed you," Will said softly. "Was it Dr. Lecter?"

The boy seemed to stiffen, eyes going wide. A terrible sort of whistling sound filled the room, making their hair stand on edge and blood run cold.

"He is a bad man, Mr. Graham. Stay away from him. Don't let him take you inside the walls, you never come back out."

A *whoosh* like a candle being blown out, and the boy was gone.

"Will..." Frederick's voice, soft and pleading, washed over him. "Will, say something."

"He's killing them. He's killing the boys, and he brought me here hoping it would suggest his innocence if he seemed to be on the case," Will whispered, eyes wide and burning. "He's playing a game, setting us all up..."

Without another word Frederick wrapped his arms tight around Will, hiding his tear-streaked face against his shoulder. Just behind them, behind the wall adjacent to the bed, there was a fierce, desperate sort of scratching sound.

*

"So what are you going to do?" Frederick asked as they walked to breakfast together the next morning. "You can't just march up to him and start making accusations, we have no proof

save for a dead boy that came to us in the night."

"I know, believe me," Will breathed, voice shaking and breathless. He was still stirred to his core by the previous night's events...all of them. While his heart quaked to its very core to think of the dead boy standing in the darkness, he still felt a sort of calm and fortitude in the knowledge that Frederick at least was on his side. Despite everything he found comfort in his companionship. His only hope was that it would continue to be a source of comfort, and that his actions would not bring trouble upon Frederick in any way.

When they arrived at the dining hall they were caught off guard by the panic that seemed to fill the room. Students clumped together whispering and glancing around suspiciously, while teachers spoke with grave faces and in grave tones near the door. Will led Frederick to the group of adults, a leaden feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"What is it? What's happened?" Will asked, steeling himself for the answer.

It was just as he feared. Alana replied, "Another boy has been taken. Jacob Kessler."

"Disappeared into the night like all the rest?" Will asked, acutely aware of how wide his eyes must seem.

"Not quite," Jimmy said, a sickly sort of green pallor having crept into his skin. "This one...this one we know the exact location of."

"Dead," Will whispered. It was not a question; he knew the boy was dead. He knew they were all dead. Swallowing hard, he pushed shaking fingers through his hair. "There's nothing else for it. I need to see the body."

"You're not a detective, you're a ghost hunter," Brian pointed out bitterly. "What use will you be?"

"I'm better than nothing," Will snapped, feeling color creep into his cheeks. "Do you have a better suggestion? Or perhaps you'd simply prefer to sit there uselessly and make witty observances?"

Brian was clearly about to fight back when Jimmy touched his shoulder. "Alana, please take him?" he asked, ready to hang back and calm his friend.

Alana nodded, drawing a deep breath before leading them through the doorway. "Dr. Lecter will be in there, I assume. The constable came first thing this morning, they've been talking for some time."

"Why did no one come find me?" Will asked, heart beginning to race in his chest.

"We tried, Jimmy and I," she said softly. "We checked your room twice and looked all over the school, you were nowhere to be found."

Will blanched. "I was out looking for your groundskeeper," he lied smoothly. "I've still yet to see him."

"He's a curious sort. I haven't seen him in weeks, he tends to hold himself up in that house for weeks at a time without leaving. I'm sure any other man would dismiss him, but Dr. Lecter is sympathetic to his condition."

Will paused, storing that bit of information for later. Before he had time to inquire any further they were standing at the large oaken doors leading to the chapel. Of course. Of course the body was to be found in the only Holy space on school grounds. He was making a mockery of this whole situation. Will took a deep breath, slowly pushing the doors open. They protested the entire way, a sullen groan filling the silent hall and sending a chill down his spine.

He turned to find that Alana had already walked away, handkerchief pressed to her mouth and head bowed as she left.

Inside, Hannibal Lecter stood in grave solemnity, hands clasped behind his back as he spoke to a man in a sharply pressed suit of navy and black. Various brass buttons and buckles jangled all over his coat, and over his lip bristled an impressive salt and pepper mustache.

Beyond them, carefully cut open and put on display, was the boy.

The artistry of it would have caught his breath in his throat, if the horror hadn't already done so. The boy was knelt at a pew, knees on one of the cushioned benches used for prayer. His hands were clasped in front of him, bound together at the wrist, palms up. It was such an obvious mockery of supplication. Resting in his upturned palms was-

"His heart," Will choked, removing his handkerchief from his breast pocket and holding it to his mouth.

The constable stepped forward, frown apparent under his facial hair. "Who's this then?"

Hannibal stepped forward, putting his hand on the man's shoulder. "Mr. Graham is investigating the school on my invitation. He can be trusted, I assure you." Hannibal looked at Will, unspoken words hanging in the air like ripe fruits waiting to be plucked. Will had no desire to taste them. "In fact...could you give us a moment? I'd like to hear Mr. Graham's opinion without making any suggestions or influencing your own inquiry."

The man looked between them before shaking his head, turning and walking out. Another demonstration of the influence Hannibal had over the people around him.

"Well. This seems like a fairly clear message to me," Hannibal murmured, eyes locked on Will. He studied his every expression, drinking in the slightest changes in his mood and carriage. He was an artist, waiting for the public's reaction to his newest work. Waiting to see if it had the desired effect.

"Oh?" Will squirmed like a naughty schoolboy caught misbehaving. That was Hannibal's power; you felt just as he wanted you to feel.

"Isn't it obvious?" Hannibal asked, raising an eyebrow. "This...phantom, whoever it is...he's sent a love letter to you. The position on his knees, the heart in his hands...he seems to be

prostrating himself before you. He's waiting to see if you return the affection and accept the gesture."

Will felt something akin to terror curling its icy fingers around his heart. If this was a message of affection, a courtship, he knew exactly who it came from. Swallowing hard, his mind clicked rapidly over all of the possible ways this could play out.

"If it's a declaration of affection," he said slowly, "it's a very subtle one. I mean...apart from the murder and violence of course. Those are a bold statement," he said quickly when confusion flashed across Hannibal's face. "I see what he's doing, and of course it's very artistic. Beautiful even. But how am I to know who he is? Where to find him, and how to signal my own interest? A lovely gesture is nothing more than a gesture if I don't know who to assign it to."

Hannibal stared for a long moment. Will could practically hear the headmaster's heart pounding in his chest, the way he was holding himself back from outing himself right then and there. "I suppose he'll find a way," he said softly. "We'll have to be vigilant of course."

"Of course," Will agreed, color rising high in his cheeks. He felt trapped, but strangely also like he'd just won at their game. At least a round of it. Now was the time to withdraw before he spoiled it somehow. "I'll take my leave, Dr. Lecter. I believe I've seen enough of this sorry sight, there is work to be done." Nodding his head politely he turned, rushing out of the room before he could make himself sick and ruin his own facade.

*

A picnic was arranged on the lawn that morning to not only feed the students, but to let them bask in the rare English sunshine and heighten their moods. Blankets were spread out and sports equipment was unpacked from the shed, strewn about the lawn so the boys could exercise and stretch their limbs. Most of them were lounging on blankets, feasting on various sandwiches and fruits and punches while gossiping about the morning's events.

Will sat on a blanket with Alana, nibbling half-heartedly at a cucumber sandwich as he watched some of the younger boys play cricket a ways off. Both had been sitting in an uncomfortable silence, unsure of what to say to address the situation at hand.

After a moment it was Alana who broke the silence. "Are you and Dr. Chilton lovers?" she asked in her soft but sure voice, gaze never wavering from the students.

Will was too tired, too bone-weary to fear her response. "Yes."

She nodded. Not another word was spoken on the subject, both returning to their private thoughts and private worries. A cricket bat flew dangerously close to them, Frederick's voice ringing clear across the lawn as he called for the boys to be more careful. Will had to resist a strong urge to look his way.

"I fear they're going to close the school down," Alana murmured after a moment. "I'm surprised they haven't done so already. My only guess is that Hannibal's charms played a part in keeping us open, he has a way with people."

“Ah. Yes, Hannibal,” Will said uneasily. “Alana, have you ever...has he ever given you any reason to doubt? You seem to put a great deal of faith in him, are you sure that faith is well placed?”

Alana looked over, a curious expression curving her delicate features. “Never once. He’s certainly got his quirks, and quite a few interests I don’t understand, but he’s never once made me feel as if I can’t rely on him completely. I promise you, he has the boys’ best interests in mind.” She peered at him, leaning closer. “Why, have you found something?”

“Nothing,” Will said quickly. “Nothing, no. I just have to cover all angles, I suppose.”

*

By the time the students had been ushered inside to resume classes Will was ready to speak to the groundskeeper; whether he himself was ready or not. Striding across the lawn, he rapped his knuckles loudly on the door without pausing to catch his breath. Once again, just as with his previous visit, no response. He wasn’t really expecting one. “Peter? Mr. Bernadone?” he called, repeating the action with more vigor.

Silence.

With a grunt of frustration he walked around the perimeter of the small house, taking in everything he could. For being the home of the man who tended the gardens it was falling into an obvious state of disrepair. The roses that had seemed so lush just days before were wilting, drooping and dying and turning a sad brown. The windows were shuttered, cobwebs gathering in the corners. No one had lived in this house for quite some time now, if his suspicions were correct.

Will glanced around to make sure he was truly alone before testing the nearest window. It was locked, but it did jiggle just slightly when he gave it a good hard push upwards. Two more windows yielded the same results before a stroke of luck; the fourth window, the most in need of repair, creaked and groaned and protested before jerking upwards a fraction. Gritting his teeth, Will braced himself against the wall before giving a mighty push upwards. With a shriek the pane of glass slid open, a gust of musty air escaping from inside.

“Bloody windows,” he muttered, hoisting himself into the small house. His feet landed on an old and worn wood floor, barely covered by a threadbare carpet. A cloud of dust rose around his feet, swirling before settling.

The state of the furniture and decor inside confirmed his suspicions; no one had lived in this house for quite some time. He wasn’t sure if this groundskeeper was some sort of accomplice or simply an unwitting accessory, but he definitely wasn’t a resident of the Hobbs School for Boys. In the kitchen empty cabinets hung open, nothing lining the pantry shelves but filth and the droppings of rodents. The furniture was covered as if the residents were on a long vacation and would someday return home looking to find their belongings in tact. Placed on each table were the remnants of candles, used to the very nub and no longer of any use to anyone.

Relying on thin shafts of sunlight filtering in through the windows, Will made his way through room after room in search of some sort of clue as to why he had been lied to about the house's inhabitants. It was quite clear that Hannibal wanted this small space, hidden in plain sight and completely inconsequential, to be of no interest to Will or anyone else.

At the very back corner of the place there was a door that looked like it ought not to be there; it was very nicer than any other door he'd encountered, and there was no dust or debris gathered on or around it. Will ran his hand lightly along the polished brass handle, grasping it and turning easily. The door pushed open with no protest, swinging in to reveal a dark room with nothing but an ornate rug and a tall, rough hewn table.

What was this room supposed to be? There were no windows to let in sunlight, no hangings on the walls to provide warmth. Apart from the rug there was nothing to suggest that this room was meant to be habitable.

Without provocation or the slightest gust of wind, the door behind him swung shut with a definitive *click!* Will was cast in darkness.

"Hello?" he called, suddenly overcome with the sensation of being watched. He thrust his palms out in front of him, groping through the inky blackness for the handle of the door. "Is anyone there?" Once he found it he gave a turn and a tug, heart stuttering in his chest when it refused to move.

A faint, soft glow to his left; he turns, face to face with another boy.

"Which one are you?" he whispered, swallowing hard.

"You've got to look closer, Mr. Graham," the boy said simply, nodding to the table. This one appeared to be much older, of a stockier build but fairly short for his age. He seemed to be wet; drops of water slid down his cheeks and fell to the floor, but left no dampness on the carpet below.

His eyes had been plucked from his head.

"Look closer," he insisted again, holding his candle closer to the table.

Will found himself stuck, staring at the boy with fear coursing through his veins. It took a mighty push to move himself, but after a long moment he was able to turn to the furniture in question. Walking closer, he frowned as he inspected the wood; it was covered in brown stains, stains that traveled down each leg and to the rug below.

It was most certainly blood.

The candle light went out, and the door swung open behind him.

*

"There was no hint of Peter living in there?" Frederick asked, his confusion apparent. He and Will lie tangled together in the bed, stripped to their nightclothes and world-weary. While Will had been looking for answers to the mystery surrounding them, Frederick had spent his

day comforting students, supporting the staff, and trying to keep himself together. They were both exhausted.

“No, nothing,” Will murmured. His cheek rested against Frederick’s shoulder, the feeling of long fingers stroking through his hair helping to ease the tension from his mind. “No food, no clothes, no candles, nothing to suggest it’s been inhabited at all for at least months now.”

“But I’ve seen him,” Frederick said, positively baffled. “I’ve seen him tending to the lawns, and I swear I’ve seen him going in and out of that house on multiple occasions...”

“Just one more mystery to lump in with the rest,” Will sighed, absently kissing the crook of Frederick’s neck. “And with Hannibal breathing down my neck I haven’t been able to solve a single thing. It’s doing my head in, all these questions with no answers...” He groaned, trying to burrow deeper into the arms encircled around him. He could feel the frustration in his body, from the ache in his back to the clicking in his jaw that could only mean he’d been grinding his teeth as he slept. His only solace was his time with Frederick, these few hours to spend in secret before the school once more awoke and everything once more fell into chaos.

“You’ll unravel everything,” Frederick said resolutely, no softness in his voice or affect. He was not pandering, he was stating it as simple fact. “Tomorrow Dr. Lecter leaves with those students for the weekend. We can get behind the wall, see what is hidden back there, and hopefully answer some of your questions.”

Will sighed, stomach twisting with a mix of anxiety and anticipation. “I certainly hope so.”

“You will,” Frederick said firmly. “For now, sleep. There’s nothing to be done tonight, so we might as well rest.”

With this insistence and a soothing hand petting along his spine, Will managed to drift off. And if his dreams were full of phantoms and evil and murder, well...he couldn’t remember a single one in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Holy mackerel, this one took me a long time to get out. I'm so sorry for the wait guys! It's been a weirdly stressful time at work so I've been crashing as soon as I get home every night. But today...today is a sick day!

I can't believe there are only two chapters left. Thank you so so much for all your support and kind words while we go on this journey together!

Pssst if you want to show your author some love go like my [tumblr page here](#), it's where I document my adventures dealing with immigration to finally live with my girlfriend!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The sound of polite knocking on Frederick's door had Will awake and out of bed before his brain could catch up to his body. He looked frantically around the room for a place to hide as his heart did its best impression of a timpani drum. Sleep wrapped around him like a shroud, confusing his senses as he stumbled around the dim light filling the room. Hastily snatching up his glasses, he shoved them on his face at entirely the wrong angle as he looked at Frederick in a panic.

"The bed, under the bed," Frederick hissed before throwing a casual and calm-sounding, "just a moment!" in the direction of the door. Once Will was tucked under the bed he adjusted the sheets, draping them over the side so as to hide his body if anyone were to be poking around. Under the bed Will tried to steady his breathing, lips parted and head tilted back as he tried to quiet himself.

Frederick took a moment to gather himself, pulling on a house coat before moving to open the door. Will didn't have to hear the voice to know who it was. Expensive-sounding shoes clicked against the floorboards, the steps even and measured with a poise few people could replicate by posture alone. What he could see of the trousers were fine and neatly pressed. It was Hannibal.

"Good morning Dr. Chilton." He sounded completely calm and genial, his voice as soft as the gentle light of sunrise filling the room. "I was hoping to find Mr. Graham but he doesn't seem to be in his room. Did he make any mention to you of his plans for this morning?" The implication was as heavy as his voice was gentle. He'd come in expecting to find Will in a compromising position.

Frederick's voice was cool and measured as he responded. "No, I couldn't imagine what he might be up to." Will was relieved to hear that he was an easy liar. "I'm sure he's feeling insurmountable pressure with the latest murder, so I do hope he's spending his time wisely." Frederick was playing up their previous coldness towards each other. Clever man. Will felt a rush of fondness that had no place under the bed with him at such a time.

"I'm sure he is," Hannibal responded firmly, as if to admonish Frederick for his lack of faith. "I'll have to check the grounds, I know he's been interested in finding Mr. Bernadone for quite some time now." Will could hear him beginning to walk around the room, could feel the vibrations of each footstep from his spot on the floor. "You remember that I'm to leave with the students this afternoon?"

"I do," Frederick assured, moving to stand by his desk. It was a small attempt at drawing Hannibal's eye away from the bed, where his lover was currently huddled with nothing to cover himself but a hanging sheet.

“Excellent. Please keep an eye on everyone this weekend, I’d like to keep the students within sight whenever they’re out and about for the day. I considered canceling our appointments, but with everything going on I feel it would be wise to maintain some sort of normalcy for the boys.”

Hannibal took a few steps closer to the bed, pausing just before it. Will could feel his heart pounding in his chest, the acrid taste of fear rising high in the back of his throat. If he was to be spotted...forget the affair, if he was to be spotted they’d have much larger problems than the outing of their sexual proclivities.

After a long moment Hannibal turned, pacing to the door. “Right then. I am entrusting you with my school, Dr. Chilton. Do try to keep everyone alive until I get back.”

“I will make absolutely certain, sir.”

There was a moment of silence where Will could practically hear the men nodding politely to each other before a few more smart footsteps, and then Hannibal was on the other side of the door and they were safe once again. Will gave it a few solid breaths before he crawled out, wanting to be entirely sure that Hannibal wasn’t going to pop in for any last minute instructions. Once he was free he sat heavily on the edge of the bed, looking astounded.

“Has he ever visited your quarters like that before?” he asked, looking curiously at Frederick.

“No,” Frederick responded, thoroughly unnerved. “He calls us to him when he’d like a conference.”

“He’s onto us. You do realize it, right?” Will said wearily. “He was trying to catch me in here, to spot us together.” He should have known from the moment Hannibal spotted them in Frederick’s room a few nights back that he’d grow suspicious. A man as dangerous as he did not so easily let others encroach on his quarry.

Frederick nodded, face pale as he sat next to Will on the bed. Without a word he turned into the other man, resting his cheek upon Will’s shoulder and falling into a fearful silence that neither man seemed to be able to fill.

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“He’s gone?”

Frederick nodded, pale and anxious as he shut his bedroom door. With careful hands he turned the lock, flipping the latch into place. Across the room Will stood next to the bed which had been pulled out to the middle of the floor. Various tools and instruments covered the duvet in a scatter of metal and iron and rust; hammers, saws, a wicked looking crowbar. On Will’s face was a grim determination, on his body a pair of old work trousers and an equally old undershirt.

“Good. I can start peeling back the wallpaper while everyone is at supper, and once they’ve gone to bed I can do the heavier work. That should get me behind the wall around midnight.” Will started to pace, hands clasped behind his back.

“Normally they return late in the afternoon the next day,” Frederick said, nearly breathless with the excitement ahead. He sat in his desk chair, folding his hands in his lap and worrying his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Excellent,” Will breathed. “Perfect. That should be plenty of time to search around.”

Frederick rubbed his hand across his face, world-weary like he’d never been before. “I don’t like this, Will. I feel...I feel empty, like I’ve just suffered a great loss. You’re far too excited for what’s to come, for what we might find...and all I can think of is how I don’t want you to be that loss. Are you sure we should do this?”

Will stepped over, expression softening. He’d never been much of a man for attachment, it was sticky and messy and a burden for someone who moved around as much as he. Still, seeing Frederick look so vulnerable stirred something in his chest that he couldn’t quite place. His lips tingled with the memory of their shared kisses, fingertips warm with the thought of the softness of his skin. Kneeling before Frederick, he reached up to touch his cheek.

“We can’t run from this. You know that as well as I do. If we don’t stop him no one will, no one will see past the mask he’s constructed. They all flock to him like a moth to flame and devour the character he’s created for himself, lapping up every word he bestows upon them. And all the while he hunts, culling his own flock.” He took Frederick’s hands in his own, bringing them to his mouth and brushing gentle kisses along his knuckles. “He’s got to be stopped, and right now we’re the only ones in a position to do so.”

Frederick nodded, lips pressed into a thin line of resignation. “You know, I didn’t take you for the heroic type the night we first met.”

Will turned his face away, shaking his head. “I’m nothing of the sort. Simply duty-bound to put an end to this madness, if I’m the only one who can.”

While Frederick could see the truth in his words, he still felt the impending loss of someone he deeply cared for. He was standing before an open grave, dreading the moment it would be filled but knowing there was nothing he could do to stop it.

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When the time finally came to put the plan into motion Will found he was too eager to be anxious. His hands shook with his desire to get behind the wall, heart slow and steady as his mind honed in on the task at hand. He’d spent much of his evening peeling delicate ivory wallpaper from the walls; for one bizarre moment he thought of the cost he’d incur by tearing the room apart thus, but he dismissed the notion with a bitter laugh. What was the point of a beautiful building that hid so much death and ugliness? He was glad to tear away its mask, to expose it and everyone in it for what they truly were.

After some time he’d exposed a decent portion of the wall, a patch in the lower right-hand corner about three feet wide and four feet tall. He didn’t need some grand entrance, just enough space to crawl through. Heavy strips of paper littered the floor, covering everything

in an even layer of ivory curls. It seemed like a mockery of the situation, a quiet, snowy day in a landscape of death and mutilation.

Frederick entered, making a face as he carefully stepped through the sea of paper. “How goes the demolition?” he asked, raising an eyebrow and surveying his bedroom. Regardless of the situation he was still a man of order and neatness.

Will looked around, taking in the mess he’d made. “I’ll clean up when I’m done,” he promised, glancing at Frederick. “How was everyone at dinner? Did anything seem out of place?”

“Nothing stood out,” Frederick reported, rolling up his shirt sleeves and removing his waistcoat. “Everyone was rather subdued, but I suppose that’s to be expected.”

Will moved across the floor, a gentle rustling sound following him as he went. “I’d be more concerned if they weren’t,” he reasoned. “What with everything that’s happened.”

Frederick nodded, cleaning up some of the litter around his desk. “I would guess that we have around two hours before we can trust that everyone is fully asleep. What do you intend to do until then?”

“Sit here anxiously and stare at my wristwatch until two hours have passed,” Will said honestly, sitting on the edge of the bed and drawing a great breath. He let it out slowly, rubbing his hands along the tops of his thighs. His eyes glazed over slightly as he retreated into his head, starting to imagine all the horrors that might wait on the other side of the wall.

Frederick looked over at him, once again raising an eyebrow. He moved to the bed, sitting close enough to Will that their thighs pressed together from knee to hip. “That sounds positively ridiculous. Counterproductive, at the very least,” he admonished. “You’re a smarter man than that, Mr. Graham. You know there’s nothing good that comes out of brooding.” Taking Will’s hand in his own, he turned it so he could trace his fingers lightly over the lines of his palm. He admired Will’s skin, calloused from hard work and a life of making his own way. “The more you sit here and stew the slower time will pass, don’t you know that? We might as well go sit outside and watch the grass grow.”

Will watched their hands, half-mesmerized as Frederick stroked his skin. “I suppose. What would you suggest to pass the time?”

“Something to take your mind off of what you have to do. Something that relaxes your body and clears your head, so you’re prepared when the time comes.” Leaning in, Frederick pressed his lips lightly to the corner of Will’s mouth. “Perhaps we could think of something that might do the job...”

Will swallowed hard, closing his eyes. “I’m not sure if...is now really an appropriate time, with what’s to come?” Despite his words he felt himself leaning in, ready to moor himself to the only static thing he’d found in this place of change and decay.

Frederick blushed, dropping the pretense of seduction. “I...I can’t shake the feeling that something terrible is coming, Will. That something might happen to either one of us,

something...final. And if that's the case...I need to be with you once more, need to be sure that I have at least one more night with you before we're parted forever." He turned away, trying to hide his shame from the man sitting next to him.

Will felt as if he were walking through some bizarre dream. Everything outside of the room, outside of the bed they sat on, seemed so far away. It was as if everyone else stood on the other side of a great sea, and he and Frederick were the only ones on their dark shore. "I understand," he murmured. And he did. Who knew what the night had in store for him? Hannibal was a dangerous man, and there was no saying what he might do when threatened with exposure. He drew Frederick's hand to his mouth, lightly brushing his lips against his knuckles. "I understand," he repeated, looking up from under his lashes.

"Here, lay back," Frederick commanded softly, pressing on Will's shoulder until he was laying properly on the bed. With careful hands he untucked Will's shirt, waiting for him to lift his arms before pulling it over his head and tossing it away. Shivering under Frederick's gaze, Will could do nothing but watch as he was stripped bare.

Stroking his palms along Will's chest, Frederick drew a breath to steady himself. "Will you promise me you won't do anything reckless, regardless of what you find? Swear that you'll do your very best to return to me as whole and unharmed as you possibly can."

With trembling hands Will reached up, stroking Frederick's hair before sliding his hand down to cup his cheek. "I promise. I have every intention of returning to you, Frederick." His eyes were heavy with emotions he rarely let himself feel. It felt too grand, too important in a way that twisted his tongue and stopped the words deep in his chest. He always knew that such emotional bonds would cost him too dearly. He spent his days moving from place to place, making many enemies and very few friends. To come here, to find this...he could barely process it. "I'm not...I'm not quite good with finding the words to express..."

"Then save them," Frederick murmured, leaning in to put their lips to better use.

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At the end of two hours Will found himself clothed, calm, and sitting on the edge of the bed with a crowbar in hand. It was utterly surprising how at peace he felt now that the time had come. All that lay between him and the answers he wanted was some wood and plaster, nothing more.

He'd done his research on what was in his path; the school was an old building. The blueprints he found dated well back to a time when everything was brick and stone and little insulation. The good news for him was that many of the rooms had been bisected to create more offices, classrooms and bedrooms. A simple rap on the wall with his knuckles told him that these were not stone, they were plaster and wood and other materials much easier to tear apart.

Sliding to his knees he knelt at the very corner of the wall, the lower corner farthest from the door. "Frederick, darling, hand me the crowbar?" he murmured, blindly reaching behind him.

"How does it look?" Frederick asked, sliding out of bed to do as asked.

“There’s a little notch in the plaster,” Will murmured distractedly. “That’s a stroke of good luck. I should be able to get the prybar in there and tug a good chunk loose.” He looked over his shoulder, managing a smile. “I do apologize in advance for tearing your room apart.”

Frederick snorted, moving to kneel beside him. He shifted carefully so as not to put weight on his bad hip. “You don’t look very sorry, Mr. Graham.” Not that he cared much about the state of his room, not when he felt as if he was sending Will to the gallows. “Perhaps I should come with you.”

“I wish you could,” Will said honestly. “I’d be safer to have you on my side. I need you here though, if I don’t come back you’re the only chance to make someone see what’s happening here.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Frederick hissed. “Of course you’ll be back.”

“Of course I will,” Will said softly, smiling. “Now stand back, I’ve got a wall to bring down.”

It was a stroke of brilliant luck to find the hole in the wall. He’d been afraid of hammering against the plaster and alerting the entire school to what they were doing. As it stood he only had to slip the claw of the prybar into the notch, using the heel as a fulcrum and pushing down on the shaft to pry the wall towards him. A small chunk broke off, he only had to grasp it in his hands and pull to remove it completely. “That was easy,” he murmured, tossing it to the floor. Discarding the prybar, he grasped the edge of the plaster in his hands and gave a sharp tug, breaking another bit off.

“It might not take so long after all,” Frederick mused. Once there was a space wide enough he moved to join Will, working to widen the hole to the left as Will tore off pieces that stretched higher and higher from the floor.

Leaning down, Will peered into the opening they’d created. “I can’t see anything,” he reported. “Black as pitch.”

“I have a lantern hidden behind my books,” Frederick said, sweat beginning to bead at his temples as he worked. “You can take it with you.”

It wasn’t long until there was a space just large enough for Will to slide through. He knelt, peering in once more.

Two eyes looked back, just behind the wall. “*Are you coming, Mr. Graham?*” a child whispered before disappearing into the darkness.

Will fell back, scrambling away from the wall. “Damnation,” he hissed, blanching. “I don’t like living children, must I babysit dead ones?”

Frederick was pale, hand over his heart. “At least they know you’re helping them.”

“That’s some sort of comfort, I suppose,” Will muttered, eyebrows knit. Drawing in a fortifying breath, he crouched down and looked through once more. The only light trickling in was a thin, watery stream from the bedroom, illuminating a small patch of rough hewn

wood flooring and nothing else. Inky blackness pressed in on him from all sides. Slowly, ever so slowly, he slid a hand in. He trailed it along the floor, feeling for holes or traps or anything that might impede his investigation. He found nothing.

“Alright. Alright,” he said firmly, nodding. “Here I go.”

They’d only exposed enough of a hole to get him through, not wanting to waste much time completely tearing the wall down from top to bottom. Will crouched on all fours, shoulders drawn in close together as he carefully crawled into the hidden room. Just before his hips could get stuck he tilted his body a bit to the left, slipping in the rest of the way.

“Alright,” he said once more. “Hand me the lantern?”

Immediately the lamp was thrust through, its warm glow filling the space. Will cast his eyes about, glad to see it was devoid of ghostly young men. Comforted, he looked about to take in his surroundings.

It appeared to be a hallway more than anything. To his left was a ladder, bolted at the stop to a simple wooden wall. He looked up but was unable to spot any sort of latch or handle that might lead to a room above. Reaching out, he lightly touched a step - it was rough, hastily made. It was clear that it had been quickly thrown together with no thought on form and all focus on function. It was, however, sturdy. Each step was wide, wide enough to fit the length of the average man’s foot. It was steep enough that it was only a hand-railing away from being a staircase.

Bracing himself, he set his foot on the bottom rung. Pushing down firmly gave no yield, it looked ready to bear his weight and perhaps more.

“Anything?” Frederick called anxiously, leaning in a bit and trying to make out Will’s shape in the darkness.

“Steps,” Will responded. “They go quite high, well beyond what might be the next floor. I’m going to see where they lead.”

Frederick chewed his lip, unmoved by the coppery taste of blood that hit his tongue as he wore away at the delicate skin. “Be *careful*,” he reminded, retreating once more to his bedroom.

Will found the climb to be uneventful. The construction of the stairs made them easy to navigate, and soon he was standing with one hand touching along the ceiling while the other held the lamp aloft. He set the light down on the top step, lifting both hands to slide and push along the ceiling.

It didn’t take long, just a good, sturdy push. A panel in the ceiling gave, lifting just slightly. Will nearly jumped out of his skin, quickly returning it to its rightful place. He couldn’t risk being seen, couldn’t risk anyone knowing he was snooping about or that he had found the passage behind the wall. All he needed was the wrong word whispered into Hannibal’s ear and who knew what sort of retribution he might face.

He carefully balanced himself on the very top step, tilting his head and listening. No footsteps, no voices, nothing. Pressing up ever-so-gently, he barely lifted the panel and stopped to listen again. When he confirmed the silence inside he raised the panel completely, moving it to the side and looking up.

It was the attic. Still empty and still illuminated only by the light streaming in from a few tall windows, this time the moon rather than late afternoon sunshine. He lifted himself in to see the emptiness inside. How had he not found the panel during his earlier investigations? With an irritated click of his tongue he swept over the room to make sure nothing had changed before lowering himself through to the ladder and replacing the panel.

“It leads to the attic,” he reported. “I’m sure that’s got something to do with the blood I found in there, he must have killed one of the boys upstairs and used this passage to whisk his body away without being seen.”

Frederick sighed from the other side of the wall. “This all seems so unbelievable, I keep thinking I’ll wake up. What next?”

Will stepped off of the ladder, holding his lantern up and turning to face the rest of the passage. Darkness stretched out in front of him, so consuming that the light ended before the passage did. He carefully stepped forwards, trailing his hand along the wall as if to keep it in place as the other arm stretched the light as far forward as he could manage. One foot. Two feet. Just at the end of the third the light hit a drop in the floor, spilling downwards to reveal a set of stairs.

“It leads down,” he called. “I’m going to follow and see what happens. If you don’t hear from me in two hours you *must* go find the other teachers and tell them what’s happening. Do you understand?”

“I do,” Frederick called, voice wavering. “Two hours. Alright. I’ll see you before then, I hope.”

Will smiled softly despite what lay ahead, shaking his head. “So do I.”

Stepping into the void didn’t prove to be as hard as he imagined it should be. His heart had begun to pound like a war drum, throbbing in his ears and spurring him on to battle. As he walked down he could feel his fingertips itching for a fight. He would set this right. He would fix this, all of it.

The floor at the bottom forked in two directions; one meandered a bit to the right before straightening out, the other breaking off in a sharp turn to the left. There was nothing to do but trust his gut, which pulled him to the left.

He was a few steps in when a small hand shot out and grabbed the sleeve of his shirt.

“You mustn’t go that way,” the boy whispered, eyes wide. His cheeks were still full and round in his youth, even as his head seemed to dangle off of his neck by a thread. “That’s where he takes you, when no one else expects it he snatches you away. You mustn’t go there.”

Will stared down with wide eyes, stomach giving a violent turn. “Yes, I must,” he managed, voice barely a whisper. “Don’t worry. I’m not small. He can’t take me so easily.”

The boy looked distraught, shaking his head before seeming to evaporate into the darkness.

The corridor did not prove to be a long one. Twenty meters, perhaps twenty-five, and he found himself to be standing in front of a simple door with a latch and no handle. His hands shook as he reached out to touch the latch. There was no reason it should look so shiny, so new, other than to show its consistent use. He ran his fingertips along the hinges, stroking them absently before gripping the lock and flipping it open. It made no noise, no sound of protest; just a gentle *clink* as it was pushed back against the wall. Now unlocked, it was quite easy for Will to inch the door open and press his ear to the gap.

Once again he heard nothing. Over the years his ears had become quite keen, sensitive enough to catch the gentle breath of a man at rest. He heard no such breathing now. Gritting his teeth together, he opened the door.

Blinding, dizzyingly bright light flooded into the hall, forcing his eyes shut and his arm up to shade them from the onslaught. He hadn’t taken into account that his eyes had become accustomed to a dimmer light here within the walls. Blinking furiously, he tried to ease them to the brightness. It took a long minute, but finally he was able to open his eyes and step inside.

Will found himself in Dr. Lecter’s office.

He felt his breath catch in his throat, heart hammering against its cage as he took in the room. This was exactly what he needed, proof enough that there was something suspicious about the headmaster that ought to be looked into. His mind turned over a multitude of possibilities. He wanted to run immediately to Frederick, to embrace him and inform him of their good luck. Still, he knew he ought to follow the other fork in the hallway to see what other evidence he could find.

“It shouldn’t have been this easy,” he said to himself, incredulous.

The sentiment was cut short, breath exiting his body in a sharp gasp as a strong arm wrapped around him and drew him tight to a broad chest. Another hand, soft and elegant, wrapped around his throat.

“You’re right, especially when hard work builds character.” Hannibal’s voice was smooth and silky in his ear, even as a strong hand pressed against his windpipe. It did not take long for Will’s vision to black out and for consciousness to slip away from him.

Chapter End Notes

Wowww that was some writer's block. But here we are! The new season has me going again, especially all that lovely lurking about in that church. Two chapters left of

spookums!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Quick chapter warning for some non-con touching: affectionate touches, hair stroking, etc. Also, canon-typical violence.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A soft whimper escaped Will's lips. It was delicate; brittle. The only sound that could peel through the shroud of silence that covered him. Everything was dark, and thick, and black, and so very far away. A lancing pain shot through his skull, his entire head seeming to throb and reel. Had he ever experienced a misery of this sort? He didn't think he had... not that his memory served any real purpose in that moment.

"Mr. Graham? Wake up Mr. Graham, he's coming back..."

Will groaned, his stomach roiling and churning as he regained consciousness. He tried to roll to his side but found something stopping him. Choking back a gag he tugged his body to the side once more before giving up and flopping to his back. Where did this pain come from? What had he done?

"You mustn't move around so much, Will." Smooth words washed over his body, a balm in the burning silence. He felt a cool cloth pressed to his head, a few errant droplets sliding down his cheeks. "You had quite the fall, give your body time to heal."

"H...Hanni..."

A soft hand stroked along his brow, pushing his hair back in a reverent motion. "You've had an eventful day. An eventful week, even. Clever boy, I should have known you would have been the first to find me out." Will felt the hand trail down his hair and over his shoulder and arm, tugging at something near his wrist before returning to his cheek. "To be honest, much of me hoped you would. Hoped that your cleverness was what I'd dreamed it to be."

Will finally managed to open his eyes, but the shapes and images in front of him were nothing more than a blur. He could make out the size and figure of Hannibal, could make out the dim light surrounding him, but nothing else. "Where are we?" he managed, voice thick and clumsy in his mouth. His tongue felt foolish and useless. Too large for its cage.

"Somewhere private. I wanted to take you to a place where we could talk without interruption," Hannibal said, running a thumb lightly along his cheekbone. "I have much to tell you, and much I'd like to ask. I don't want to be disturbed."

"Frederick?" Will breathed. "Is Frederick alright?" He couldn't keep the words from tumbling past his lips.

Will could see Hannibal's mouth twist into a thin line of displeasure. It was foolish to bring Frederick up at a time like this; who knew what danger it would put him in to be seen as competition for Will's affection? Still, in the receding haze that came with regaining consciousness it seemed to be all that he could think of.

"He's fine, I'm sure," Hannibal said loftily. "Which is to say, I have not seen him since returning to the school and finding you." He carded his fingers through Will's hair, damp with sweat and curling about his forehead and temples. "Don't think on him, darling Will. There are more important things to focus on right now."

The longer Hannibal spoke the more the feeling returned to Will's limbs. Giving a weak tug to his left arm he found it securely tied to the table. Something stiff and coarse was looped around his wrist, keeping him secure and preventing any lateral movement. Trying to move his legs yielded the same response. With a grunt he twisted his head up and to the side, managing to spot the thick, rough rope chafing against his skin. Letting air hiss through his teeth, he returned his head to the board underneath him and let his eyes wander around the room.

There was not much to be seen, save for a few brightly burning candles and peeling, fading wallpaper. Hannibal stood to his left with his hip against whatever Will was tied to. It seemed to be a table, polished and fine. It was smooth underneath him, the fabric of his shirt slipping easily along the surface as he tried to wriggle about.

"Hold still, you're not well," Hannibal soothed, pressing a hand firmly to the top of Will's thigh and holding him in place.

As Will looked up to meet his eyes, he spotted the door behind his captor. It was elegant, ornate, polished...

With a groan he pressed his eyes shut tight. "We're in the gardener's cottage."

"We are," Hannibal confirmed. "Well spotted. I knew you'd made it in here, you left a window cracked open in your haste. Your detective work is admirable but we will have to work on your cleanup and stealth Mr. Graham."

"Where is Bernadone?" Will asked, afraid of the answer. "Did you murder him too?"

"Oh no, Mr. Bernadone is quite well," Hannibal said, waving his hand dismissively. "One of our horses fell ill, I gave him permission to take it into the city for proper care. I even gave him extra wages to find lodging for two weeks so he wouldn't have to make any excessively long trips back and forth. He cares quite deeply for the animals he tends to, I would hate for him to have to spend any time away from the creature worrying about it."

"So that means that he's been living here the whole time while you used this room to kill those boys," Will said through clenched teeth. "And he said nothing of it to anyone?"

Hannibal chuckled, standing and circling to the other side of the table. "Wrong, I'm afraid. All he knows is that this door is locked to him and that I've asked him to never pry and break

in. He's a loyal creature, especially after I paid a fair amount to save the horse that wounded him. It was due for the glue factory when I paid to have it moved to the school."

It was all too much to process. Will had no personal knowledge of the groundskeeper, no way of making a character judgement and deciding what sort of person he was. All he had were little flashes of what he'd been told, and the knowledge that Hannibal brazenly worked right under his nose.

"You're overthinking things," Hannibal soothed. "Let your mind be still for a bit. I promise I am not here to misuse you or cause you harm."

Will knit his eyebrows, shaking his head. "I have one more question. What happened in the attic? You've got a kill room, why was there blood on the ceiling? And what happened to the bodies once you were done with them?"

Hannibal chuckled, moving to stand at the head of the table. He reached forward, lightly massaging Will's shoulders. "Ah, you didn't make it very far along the path before you ended up in my office. The first boy was clever. He managed to slip out of the restraints while my back was turned and got back under the floor. He didn't know which direction to go, he was like a mindless animal trying to escape its natural predator." Will could feel the smooth muscle and movement in Hannibal's hands. This was a good memory for him, it was clear in his body language and affectionate touches. "He ran blindly in the dark, and ended up at the steps leading to the attic. I was naturally right on his heels. Once we were back inside the main structure of the building I couldn't risk him shouting for help. I struck him in the throat to simultaneously silence him and put him on his back, and once he was down I cut his throat."

"Did you miss a spot when you cleaned up, or did you leave it as a mockery to everyone who would miss it in their investigations?" Will asked bitterly.

"Clever boy," Hannibal repeated, cupping Will's head in his hands and massaging light circles against his temple with his thumbs. "Naturally the second. I don't leave evidence unless I intend to."

"It's why you left the boy in the chapel. For me," Will said quietly.

"I was ready for you to see me," Hannibal replied. For a split second Will thought he heard vulnerability in that marble-smooth voice, a sort of plea to be accepted. It didn't fit, and it made his stomach turn.

"Why though? Why risk being caught?"

There was silence for a moment, just the continuous light stroking along his cheeks, his temples, his jaw. When Hannibal's hands left him Will felt a momentary dread over where they might travel next. His fears were confirmed when Hannibal braced a knee next to Will's hip, lifting himself to straddle the bound man. It was a sick perversion of a lover's pose, and it made him want to crawl out of his skin. He made himself look up at Hannibal, hoping his disgust wasn't too apparent.

“You have so much potential, Will,” Hannibal said, low and slow. He wanted the words to pour over Will, to baptize him in his praises and expectations. “You’re so much more than a skeptic and a stoic. You see what others don’t and you understand beyond the possibility of mortality. You’re worth more than ghost hunts and weak, wounded men behind stone walls. I knew that if you could see me for what I was, that if I could see past your flaws and circumstance, that I could make you something great.” He leaned down, a lock of well-sculpted hair falling out of place. “Let me make you great, Will.”

It was too much to process. As his heart sped to a sharp rhythm Will closed his eyes, trying to comprehend what was happening. Of all he’d come across, of every person Hannibal encountered, what was it about Will Graham that inspired such passion? And what exactly would he have Will do if he agreed?

A life he’d never considered, never wanted, flashed before his eyes. Power, and adventure, and the ability to free all the darkness he hid within. A life where he could truly stop the fools that spent their days preying on the emotionally compromised. It felt like every day trapped in his skin was one of stiff governance of his emotions and behavior. Could he learn to let that go and be who he truly was?

“What do you do with the bodies once you’ve killed them?” he asked softly, opening his eyes.

“I eat them.” The words were a hot lance of fire through Will’s body. “The parts I do not consume I dispose of in the marshes. It’s where the tunnel ends.”

Will nodded, Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. “Alright. Yes. I’ll go with you.” His blood pounded in his ears like a war drum.

For a moment the only emotion that registered on Hannibal’s face was a well-crafted look of shock. His dark eyes studied Will closely, the acceptance in the set of his eyebrows and the grim line of determination in his mouth. He leaned down, brushing his mouth lightly across Will’s cheekbone. “Let me cut you loose,” he breathed, his voice a lover’s promise.

The minute Hannibal slid off of him Will regained the ability to breathe. He took a few cool, damp lungfuls of air, closing his eyes and letting his head clear.

“My hands first, please?” he asked. “I think my fingertips are going a bit numb.”

“As you wish,” Hannibal nodded. In his left hand was a scalpel, wickedly sharp and gleaming in the dull candlelight filling the room. Will turned his head to watch. The blade sliced through with an easy precision, separating the fibers of the rope and freeing Will’s wrist. Left, then right. As his second hand was freed he reached up to touch Hannibal’s cheek, a fleeting, familiar touch. Hannibal barely dipped into the motion before moving to his feet.

Hannibal freed his feet in the same pattern. Left, then right.

Will felt his heart slow to an imperceptible beat.

The moment the last fiber split, that fraction of a second between heartbeats, was Will's only window of opportunity. Somehow in that moment a million faces flashed before him; Alana, Zeller, Price, the students, Frederick...oh, Frederick. With that sweet thought he raised his knee to his chest, bringing the heel of his right foot down hard against Hannibal's temple.

There was no time to see if the blow had landed. With limbs ungainly from misuse he swung off of the table, staggering and stumbling underneath. The floorboard was easy to find and lift, and within a matter of second he'd dropped from the room to the cold, firm ground of the tunnel underneath it. The blood pounding in his ears made it impossible to hear the room above - there was no way of knowing how much time he had or if death was nipping at his heels. All he could focus on was the cool compression of the tunnel around him and the steady pounding of his feet against hard compacted dirt.

He was getting closer. He knew he only had so far to make it before safety was guaranteed. With a great gasp he filled his lungs, shouting for Frederick and praying to a God he didn't believe in that he would hear.

He could see light, a bright pinprick of it gleaming in the distance. Putting on an extra burst of speed he lunged for freedom, lunged desperately for the fresh air blowing in through the entrance. He could begin to see the shape of trees outside. Swamp air hit his nostrils, thick and green and acrid and so, so sweet right. Freedom loomed.

Just as Will hit the mouth of the tunnel the world tilted. Strong hands gripped him from behind, throwing him roughly to the ground. Hannibal landed hard on top of him, pressing Will's shoulders to the damp earth with firm hands. When he tried to turn his head Hannibal pressed deeper, sinking him into the loam and filling his mouth with murky water and soil. Will coughed desperately, clearing his mouth and struggling to regain his breath.

"I don't appreciate deception, Will," Hannibal said, voice far too calm. He lifted Will a bit by the shoulders, slamming him back down. Will's head struck the earth, bright bursts of starlight filling his vision. As Hannibal repeated the action his consciousness swam.

"I also don't share, and I don't lose."

The scalpel lifted in an ark, catching the morning light and blinding Will's already compromised vision. "Hannibal. Hannibal no. Don't do this," he choked, squirming pathetically. Dampness seeped through his clothing, chilling his skin. His muscles screamed, joints aching from the blows. "Hannibal please, Hannibal..."

He barely registered the knife plunging into his side. It was a dull ache, something far away from the ground he lay on. As soon as he realized what had happened it focused into a brilliant burn, agonizing and sharp. With each sob that escaped his lips Hannibal twisted the knife, drawing a pathetic sort of groan from deep in his chest.

Thin lips lowered to his ear, whispering lovingly. "I'm going to watch you die, and then I'm going to disappear. This was all for nothing, Will."

As Hannibal straightened above him Will could see figures behind him. Small boys, hollow eyes, pale faces. They looked at him with worry, the agony clear on their young faces. They

were becoming clearer. More solid. Every strangled, gurgling breath brought them into sharper relief, like he was sitting there with him.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I tried, I did. I’m sorry I couldn’t help you.”

A boy of about sixteen knelt next to him, touching his hair. Will could feel it, could feel the comforting motion as his hair was moved back from his face. “Just relax, Mr. Graham. The more you struggle the more it hurts.”

Will let his eyes drift up, losing focus until the canopy of trees above turned into a soft blanket of green above him. Just behind Hannibal he could see a shadow moving. Another of the boys, he assumed. The shadow lifted something, bringing it down swiftly in a bright, silver arc. Hannibal shifted to the side, the pressure was relieved from Will’s gut, and everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

ONE CHAPTER LEFT. ONE CHAPTER LEFT.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Consciousness returned to Will like waves lapping gently at the shore; a gentle rock forward, and a quick pull back. For a moment he could hear murmuring voices, could just sense the light beyond his eyelids. Then darkness washed over him once more. The next tide brought him a bit further out, a bit more lucidity. Hands touched his brow, rougher than the ones Hannibal had stroked him with. Someone adjusted his blanket over his feet, and then sleep again washed over him.

These cycles continued for quite some time before he was finally able to keep himself awake. He lifted his hand to touch the one stroking his hair, opening his eyes to find Alana sitting next to him.

She was pale. Her skin looked yellow and thin, and he could practically see the haunted thoughts preying on her conscience. With a great push of energy Will managed to speak.

“Do not look so guilty, Miss Bloom. He was a skilled liar, excellent at making people see him as he wanted to be seen. It speaks more about his talents for evil than it does your perceptiveness or capability for good.”

Alana turned grave blue eyes to him, but managed a smile. “Will, I can’t begin to tell you how relieved I am to see you awake.” Her hands moved to his, gently resting over them. “We’ve all been worried sick, even Brian’s been popping in to check on you after his classes. Jimmy hasn’t let him hear the end of it, he’s delighted at the sudden display of compassion.”

Will twisted his head, taking in the early morning light streaming through the window. “How long?”

“Three days,” she answered. “Frederick has been beside himself, once the police finished speaking with him he came to your side and couldn’t be convinced to move. He only left a few hours ago to eat and rest a bit, and only because we threatened him.” She smiled, shaking her head. “He hasn’t been very discreet about his feelings. Thankfully Brian and Jimmy took it with no sort of shock and we’ve all committed to keeping it out of public view. The students assume he’s simply invested because he’s the one who found you.”

Will closed his eyes, his weariness too great to justify keeping them open. “He’s a lucky man, he’s got good friends.” Raising a trembling hand, he gingerly touched around the sutures holding his stomach together. They burned, a raw open nerve right in his center. “How did I...how did I live?”

“You almost didn’t,” Alana said quietly. “It was a bit touch and go.”

“I required blood, I’m sure?”

“Yes. We had to draw it from a few of the older students. They were eager to help, especially since word has quickly gotten out about what they’re gleefully calling the ‘monster in the walls.’” It was clear that Alana detested the nickname. “Thankfully there is a skilled surgeon nearby who was able to come in and take over from our nurse who was simply keeping you alive. They put you back together, stitched you up, and then we waited.”

“Where is Hannibal being kept?” Will asked, a furious heat filling his words. He didn’t know what he intended to do, but he was quite certain he deserved his retribution. The gaping hole in his stomach saw to that.

Alana was silent a moment too long, and Will felt his stomach drop. “He got away.”

“You were dying Will,” Alana pleaded. “After Frederick struck Hannibal off of you he was too concerned with keeping you alive. You were well off of school grounds, he had to carry you back.”

“Carry me?” Will choked.

“He’d broken his cane when hitting Hannibal with it. I don’t know how he managed to carry you all the way back with his bad leg, but he did.”

Will nodded, slowly opening his eyes. The infirmary ceiling was high, held upright with broad oaken beams. He traced the beams, the veins stretching across the ceiling, letting his gaze sweep about while he gathered his thoughts. “Alana, would you be...could you tell Frederick I’m awake?”

She smiled softly, nodding. “Just a moment, Mr. Graham.” She leaned down to press warm lips to his forehead before sweeping out of the room.

His thoughts swirled in dizzying patterns across his mind. Hannibal was gone. He was alive. Frederick had saved his life.

“Good of you to wake up, Mr Graham. This is quite the extreme method of getting out of your daily lessons.”

He looked up to see Frederick standing in the doorway, a smile tugging at Will’s lips. The other man looked exhausted; it was clear he hadn’t slept much in the past few days. Stirring up some energy he reached out, holding his hand to Frederick. He immediately moved closer, taking Will’s hand and sitting in the seat Alana had recently occupied.

“How are you feeling?” Frederick asked, reaching with his free hand to touch Will’s cheek.

“A bit patched together, if I’m being honest. Emotionally as well as physically. I can’t help but wonder where the bastard got off to,” Will said, shaking his head.

“Language,” Frederick chided absently. “He’s a clever man, he’d know better than to stay around. If he stays in the country I’ll be more surprised than I could handle.” Leaning down, he brushed his lips over Will’s knuckles. “You mustn’t worry about that now. You’ve done what you came to do, leave the rest for the authorities.”

“The authorities won’t do a damn thing,” Will muttered. He tried to adjust, but the lancing pain that shot from groin to chest was too incredible. Immediately Frederick was standing, helping him find a more comfortable position on the bed. Once Will was settled he gingerly crawled in beside him, stroking soothingly over his neck and shoulders.

“Right now there’s nothing to be done,” Frederick murmured, scratching fingertips lightly through Will’s hair. The best thing to do is sleep, let your body heal. Here, rest your head on my shoulder.” He made a noise of approval once Will obeyed. “There, good. Now close your eyes and sleep.”

The weariness *was* a pressing matter. Will could feel a dull ache against his temples, could feel the bruises around his neck when he swallowed. Every muscle and bone was aflame, and the wound across his stomach was an ever-present reminder of what he’d been through. Still, the room was cool and quiet, and Frederick’s gentle heartbeat could be felt against his cheek. For the moment he was safe.

Like waves lapping gently at the shore, the tide rose and took him back to darkness.

*

He dreamt of a picnic on the beach, surrounded by adolescent boys, all basking in the sunshine and enjoying the salty air. For once everything was peaceful and fair.

*

Will walked brusquely to the main entrance doors, Alana taking long steps to try and keep up with his stride. She’d spent the morning moving her furniture into the headmaster’s office, now officially the headmistress’ office after a unanimous vote by the board of governors. She was practically running beside him, wisps of hair falling out of her loose bun.

“I do wish you wouldn’t rush around so, you’re not technically done healing,” she panted, following him out of the school and into the bright midday sun.

Will laughed, not letting up his pace for a moment. Just beyond the long driveway he could see a car waiting for him, his trunks already piled inside. “I’m up and about, I’m as healed as I need to be. I have to get to London before the rains start again or I’ll be disastrously late, I can’t waste time wallowing about in bed.”

“They shouldn’t be pushing you like this. There are plenty of men who can help in their manhunt for Dr. Lecter, they don’t need the man he nearly gutted,” she said, clearly irritated. Just by the fountain she grabbed his wrists, stopping him in his tracks. “I don’t mean this as a slight, but I have more pressing matters to attend to inside. You won’t be cross if I leave you here?”

Will nodded his assent. “I’ll be just fine, Miss Bloom. It’s a short walk, and my things are already out there.”

With a teasing smile he took her hand, bending over and politely kissing the top. As soon as he stood he found himself in a tight embrace. “Do take care of yourself, Mr. Graham. And

write me as often as possible, I look forward to hearing of your adventures.”

“I do hope they’re few and far between, but I swear to write whenever one comes along. And in my down time, when there are no adventures to be found.” He felt a warmth towards her, a sturdy glow of friendship deep in his chest. With one more tight embrace he pulled away, turning to the path and setting off for the car.

The walk felt longer than it ought to; despite how he assured Alana of his abilities the irritated scar on his stomach did tend to pulse and pull with each step. It had only been a short month since the incident, not quite enough time to fully recover. Still, he managed to make it to the shiny black car parked at the head of the drive, opening the door and sliding inside.

Frederick turned to look at him, an amused smirk on his lips. “Took you long enough.”

“You may be a solitary old hen, but I had friends to part with,” Will shot back, grinning. “You’re all packed and your things are loaded?”

Frederick nodded, smoothing out his shirt. Next to him, perched against his leg, was a brightly polished new cane to replace the one he’d broken across Dr. Lecter. “There was just enough room for both of our trunks. Lucky thing, you pack like you’re taking a year’s leave.”

“Didn’t know how long I’d be here,” Will laughed. Just out of sight of the oblivious driver, he rested his hand on the seat next to Frederick’s to let their fingers brush together. “You’re quite sure you want to join me in this? I can’t promise this will be easy, and I can’t imagine it will be a quick search. You’ve got a good position here, are you certain you want to give that up?”

Frederick looked at him, resolute. “He murdered multiple students and almost killed you. Right now he’s out there getting away with it. I’m certain.” The look in his eyes added what he could not say. *I just found you. I’m not going to lose you.*

Will nodded. “Just as long as you’re sure.”

“Besides,” Frederick said as the car began to pull onto the road. “You would have been a goner if I hadn’t broken my cane over that monster. You need someone to look after you, even if it’s a solitary old hen.”

Will laughed, tilting his head back as their fingers laced together. Behind them, the Hobbs School for Boys shrank into the distance.

Chapter End Notes

Holy cow, it's done. I started this story months ago after watching some great ghostly movies and being inspired by old history. I hit some wicked writer's block, did a ton of research on the Boxer Rebellion and early blood transfusions and homosexuality in the

early twentieth century. I've typed like a madwoman, even working on bits of story in my cubicle at work. And now it's done!

I can't thank you enough for sticking with me, you're all the best. Thanks for reading!

End Notes

Aaah this is the first solo project I've taken on of this size! Please kudos/comment to lavish me with the attention I so desperately need, and feel free to friend me on tumblr as that-vicious-vixen!

Update 7/2/15: My amazing lovely soulmate has made a phenomenal playlist for this story! It's perfect for rainy days and silent snowstorms and cuddling up with your lover and your cat and watching a ghosty movie. Check it out [here at 8tracks!](#).

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!